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MISS WENTWORTH'S IDEA.

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A NOVEL.

BY

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"MATRIMONY," "MY FRIEND JIM," "THE ROGUE,"
"A BACHELOR'S BLUNDER," ETC.

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CONTENTS.

PAGE

CHAPTER I. 1

„ II. 20

„ III. 42

„ IV. 61

„ V. 81

„ VI. 103

„ VII. 122

„ VIII. 147

„ IX. 160

„ X. 181

„ XI. 200

„ XII. 218

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CHAPTER I.

MAN is born to labour and sorrow, but is so constituted that the first of these conditions of his existence is more often a palliative than a cause of the second. To be perfectly idle and at the same time to be able to enjoy life is to be a very exceptional specimen of humanity; yet some such there are, and it was Mr. Wentworth's good or evil fortune to be one of them. He not only never did a stroke of work, but was singularly devoid of those resources by means of which moneyed men commonly seek to persuade themselves that they are busy. He read a little,

but not very much ; he knew a little about art, and a little about music and a little about old oak and old silver ; he was fond of attending sales, and he liked dining with his friends and asking them to dine with him. By far the larger portion of his time was spent at his club, where he would sit contentedly for hours together, chatting with this or that fellow member and covertly amusing himself by drawing out the weaknesses and idiosyncracies of his companion.

But it was little amusement that he could get out of Lieutenant-Colonel Medhurst, C.B., who called upon him one afternoon at that establishment and gave reasons for having done so with military brevity and precision. It was perhaps rather funny that Colonel Medhurst should attach the importance that he did to those reasons ; still the man was almost too earnest to be laughed at ; besides he was, in a certain sense, right. One could scarcely contradict him,

although one might think him impertinent, when he asserted that Sir Harry Brewster was no fit associate for two young ladies. Mr. Wentworth, having heard the Colonel out, answered him with perfect courtesy and with only so much of irony as he really could not help.

"I quite agree with you, my dear Medhurst," said he, "that Sir Harry is a very bad man. It may very well be that he deserves to be kicked downstairs, and I'm sure I don't wonder at your thinking so. Only, you see, if I were to begin kicking all the bad men of my acquaintance downstairs, I should be undertaking a task to which my physical powers are quite unequal. In this wicked world we are compelled to forgive and forget many things; especially we are compelled to close our eyes to offences which have not been committed against ourselves or members of our family."

"It is an offence against members of your

family that that man should be allowed to make his way into your house," interrupted Colonel Medhurst. "You may have forgotten some of the facts which were brought to light during the divorce case, and I have brought a full report of the proceedings in my pocket to remind you of them."

"Thanks; but I won't trouble you. It would be painful for you to dwell upon such a subject, and I think my memory serves me pretty well. It was a very bad case—as bad as you please—still I can but feel, as the rest of the world has felt, that I am not personally concerned with it. The rest of the world hasn't thought it necessary to cut Sir Harry Brewster; nor do I."

"I should have thought that every decent man and woman in England would have cut him," growled the Colonel.

"Yes; but isn't that due to the circumstance that you are personally concerned with the case?

That you should object to entering a house in which Sir Harry Brewster is received is quite natural, and if you tell me that you decline to enter my house again I must bow to your decision, deeply though I should regret it. But may I make so bold as to point out to you that ordering me to turn another man away from my door is rather a different thing? I wouldn't for the world ask you to meet Brewster, and I am very sorry that you should have met him under my roof; but I am afraid I can do no more than promise that I will take every reasonable precaution against your meeting him there a second time."

Obviously Colonel Medhurst could demand nothing more. It was open to him to say that, under the circumstances, he must cease to be a visitor in Upper Brook Street; but that was just what he felt unable to say, and it was not for him to place restrictions upon Mr. Wentworth's

visiting-list. He did go so far as to express some surprise that a notorious scoundrel should be admitted into respectable society; but all he gained by that was a bland assurance that respectable society contained quite an appreciable percentage of notorious scoundrels. The impression that he carried away with him was that respectable society stood in urgent need of reform, and that he individually did not possess the gifts requisite for a social reformer.

Mr. Wentworth, for his part, was slightly annoyed and perturbed by this interview. For reasons of his own, he would not have been greatly distressed by an intimation that Colonel Medhurst proposed to decline the honour of his future acquaintance; but no such intimation had been conveyed to him. He had merely been given to understand what was probably the case, that he was lending his countenance to an intimacy which most parents would have nipped

in the bud. For he knew very well that a good many people did cut Sir Harry Brewster, although a good many continued to receive him. He was wondering vaguely whether it might not, after all, be as well to civilly dismiss a friend whose friendship seemed likely to be productive of more trouble than it was worth, when a card was brought to him, together with a message that a gentleman who would be glad to see him for a few minutes, if he was disengaged, was waiting in the hall.

Mr. Wentworth raised his eyebrows on examining the card, which bore the name of Mr. John Hill. "What the deuce does that young idiot want with me?" he muttered. "Has he come to make a formal announcement of the sentiments with which he has been inspired by my daughter?"

Such was, in point of fact, Johnny Hill's errand, and deep was the confusion with which

he discharged himself of it. When he had been conducted into a quiet corner of the smoking-room and had been given a cigar, which he at once allowed to go out, he embarked upon a rambling statement of which the only intelligible upshot was that he wished to apologise for his intrusion. He had not been able to think of any other way of securing Mr. Wentworth's undivided attention, he explained.

"Delighted to see you anywhere or at any time, my dear fellow," that gentleman replied reassuringly. "You wanted to speak to me about something or other?"

Johnny, with red cheeks and watery eyes, blurted out the truth. The terms in which he expressed himself were somewhat incoherent; but he managed to make his meaning clear. He loved Sylvia, and he wished to know whether he had her father's permission to propose to her.

Mr. Wentworth could not help laughing. "You are very punctilious," he remarked. "I thought that in these days it was customary to propose first and then face the possibly indignant head of the family. You will be glad to hear that I am not indignant—far from it. To the best of my belief, you possess sufficient means and an irreproachable character; what more could I desire? It only remains for you to obtain Sylvia's consent."

"Ah—that's just the difficulty," observed Johnny, ruefully.

"I'm afraid I can't help you out of it. That is, unless a few words of sage counsel would be of any assistance. I wouldn't be in too great a hurry, if I were you. I should trust to time, which seldom fails to shew young women how great is the value of the—er—peculiar advantages that you possess. For the present you would do well to remember that

Sylvia is only just out of the schoolroom, that girls, like boys, have a natural curiosity to see something of the world before settling down, and that she has as yet met scarcely any men at all."

"It strikes me that she has met one too many," said Johnny, with a gloomy emphasis which rather astonished his mentor. "Of course she can't know what a brute that fellow Brewster is; but she has found out that he can make himself most confoundedly agreeable when he likes."

For once Mr. Wentworth's equable temper almost gave way. After submitting to the officious remonstrances of Colonel Medhurst, was he going to be lectured by this raw hobbledehoy?

"My good friend," said he, "in your condition it is usual and excusable to be jealous; but it is neither the one nor the other to be

idiotic. Do you really imagine that I should allow my daughter to marry a man who is ruined and divorced, and who is more than twice her age into the bargain?"

"No, I don't," answered Johnny, bluntly; "but I imagine that, if you allow him to follow her about wherever she goes, you may not be able to prevent her from falling in love with him."

Johnny Hill might be a hobbledehoy, and his apprehensions might be idiotic, but it was impossible to deny that this last observation of his sounded very like common sense. Mr. Wentworth was so far impressed by it that he rejoined, in a much less contemptuous tone: "He does not follow her about wherever she goes. At the present moment, for instance, she is staying down in the country with Lady Morecambe, and is likely to remain there for some little time, I believe."

"It was at Lady Morecambe's that she first met Sir Harry Brewster," remarked the suspicious Johnny.

"I am aware of that; but he does not reside permanently with Lady Morecambe. However, if it will make you any happier to know that we shall probably see less of Sir Harry in future than we have done lately, I can give you that comfort. My sister doesn't like him, and when a man has the misfortune to be disliked by the *de facto* mistress of a house" — Mr. Wentworth shrugged his shoulders expressively.

The truth was that he was beginning to be just a little bit alarmed. Improbable events do sometimes occur, and it is never worth while to run unnecessary risks, and Sir Harry threatened to become a nuisance. As he strolled homewards, after getting rid of Johnny Hill, who went away much reassured, he said to himself that he would give Brewster a hint. That, after

all, could be easily and inoffensively done. Brewster, as a man of the world, would understand that any repetition of the scene which had taken place between him and Medhurst must be guarded against ; there would be no occasion to discuss the merits of the quarrel or to blame either party to it.

Having arrived at this decision, Mr. Wentworth had leisure to turn his mind to other subjects and to laugh softly over the memory of Johnny's mingled embarrassment and audacity. " I suppose the poor boy really came to lodge a formal objection against Brewster," he mused. " He can't have thought it incumbent upon him to ask my consent before offering that big, red hand of his to Sylvia. Who put him up to it, I wonder ? Not his mother ; she is too delightfully stupid to believe that her ugly duckling could be cut out by any swan. Sylvia is sure to refuse him ; but then he is sure to propose

again and again. Men of that type always do, and almost always end by getting what they want. Meanwhile it will be as good as a play to watch him and his mamma during the progress of the wooing."

It was in his accustomed good spirits that Mr. Wentworth reached his house, and he was only a little put out to find Muriel waiting for him in his study. However, he thought it due to himself to greet her with a plaintive sigh.

"Everybody seems to have entered into a conspiracy to worry me to-day," he remarked. "I need not ask whether that is what you propose to do; your presence here is sufficient evidence of it. Added to which I can read your fell intentions upon your face."

"James," said Muriel, "a dreadful thing has happened. Sylvia came home this afternoon."

"An unexpected occurrence," remarked Mr.

Wentworth, "but scarcely to be called dreadful in itself. Afterwards?"

"She has come home because Harriet Morecambe wouldn't keep her any longer. It appears that that wretch Sir Harry Brewster invited himself down there and actually made an offer of marriage to Sylvia, who has accepted him."

Mr. Wentworth gave a low whistle. "This is serious," was his comment upon the news imparted to him.

"It is very serious indeed. I can't understand Sylvia; she seems to feel no shame at all about it, and she coolly declares she will marry the man with or without your consent."

"Oh, nonsense! she can't marry him without my consent. Nevertheless, it is deuced awkward, and I confess that I am amazed at Brewster's impudence. Muriel, my dear, if it would relieve your feelings to crow over me,

you can do so. I acknowledge your right to crow."

"I don't want to crow over you, James; I didn't believe any more than you did that such a misfortune as this could happen. The question is, what are we to do?"

"Well, there isn't room for much hesitation upon that point. I forbid the banns, and there's an end of it."

Muriel shook her head. "I doubt whether you will make an end of it quite so easily," said she. "You don't know how calm and resolute Sylvia is about it; I never knew her so resolute about anything before. She is quite aware that you won't give your consent; but she says she is willing to wait until she is of age."

"In that case you need not bring premature wrinkles upon yourself by drawing up the skin of your forehead as you are doing now. Before Sylvia is of age she will have seen many men

more fascinating than Brewster, and long before that date he will have forgotten her. For the time being there will be trouble, though, I suppose. It is an abominable nuisance, but I am afraid there is nothing for it but change of air. One would fain be permitted to finish the winter in one's own more or less comfortable house ; still at the call of duty one must not be found wanting. I wonder whether it wouldn't open Johnny Hill's mind to join us somewhere in southern Europe in the course of the Spring."

"Oh, Johnny Hill!" ejaculated Muriel, disdainfully.

"Why not? He is eligible, and Sir Harry is reputed to be fickle. Pique, my dear, has been the means of helping many an honest man over a stile before now. And Johnny, I may tell you, is very much in earnest. He interviewed me this afternoon for the purpose of stating his intentions explicitly. It will all come right in

the end, I think ; the most disagreeable part of the business is that I shall have to be extremely rude to Brewster. It is true that he deserves it ; but I detest being rude."

Muriel did not much like her brother's light way of treating an affair which he himself had called serious ; still it was a relief to find that he did not dream of sanctioning the engagement ; for indeed she had not felt sure that he would express himself so decisively.

"I don't think Sir Harry Brewster can give you much trouble," said she ; "you need not even see him unless you like. But you will have to see Sylvia."

"Well, yes ; that is unavoidable, no doubt. Perhaps, however, I may be allowed to eat my dinner before going through the painful duty of pronouncing sentence. It is humiliating that one's equanimity should depend so much upon the condition of one's stomach ; but we are

mortals, not angels, and we must accept the disadvantages of our position. What consoles me is that Sylvia, being as much a human being as I am, will outlive the sorrows and follies that belong to early youth. It doesn't, as a rule, take very long to outlive them."

CHAPTER II.

THE reason why parents so frequently lose all control over their children is doubtless to be found in the inefficiency of their memories. They forget—most of us, unfortunately, do—how they themselves felt when they were young; they forget that a very few years suffice to convert a child into a man or woman; they are unable to realise that after a certain time it is not enough to hold the reins, and that those who wish to retain authority must know how to drive. Mr. Wentworth, being convinced, as he had every right and reason to be, that a marriage between his daughter and Sir Harry

Brewster was a preposterous project, anticipated no great difficulty in placing his veto upon it. Tears, of course, he did anticipate, and there would be the nuisance and expense of going abroad for a few months, but that this trouble would prove anything more than a transitory one he did not for a moment imagine.

It was, therefore, without any misgivings as to his power to enforce his will upon his daughter that he requested her to accompany him into his study after a dinner during which it had not been easy to keep up appearances before the servants and to maintain the customary flow of conversation. He had made up his mind to be very patient and forbearing ; he was prepared to find Sylvia unreasonable, and he knew that he would not enjoy his first cigar ; but he had the magnanimity to acknowledge that he had been in some degree to blame for what had occurred, and he was willing to submit

to the disagreeable consequences of his own heedlessness.

"This is an unfortunate business, my dear child," he began, when he had settled himself in an armchair and had motioned to Sylvia to take one on the opposite side of the fireplace. "I need not tell you that it has distressed me very much; nor, I presume, is it necessary for me to say that it cannot be allowed to go on. Brewster has behaved very badly, I think; but that is a question between him and me; so far as you are concerned, there is only one thing to be done, and that is to forget as soon as possible how foolish you have been. We shall do what we can to help you to forget your folly, and you may be sure that we shall not remind you of it."

"Is that all, papa?" inquired Sylvia, after waiting for a few seconds.

"Practically, my dear, that appears to me to be all," answered Mr. Wentworth smiling.

"Then I suppose I may have my say. I didn't expect you to consent to our engagement; I know that Sir Harry Brewster is neither young, nor rich, nor virtuous; I know that he has been divorced from his wife and that he is in every way an unsuitable person for me to marry. Only I shall never marry anybody else."

This declaration did not perturb Mr. Wentworth, who thought that, all things considered, it was decidedly moderate both in substance and in tone. "You think so," said he; "that is what everybody thinks at first starting, and it is only after a good many years of experience that we realise our subjection to the universal and beneficent law of change. A day will come—it will not be a very distant day either—when you will get quite red in the face every time that you recollect having once fancied yourself in love with Sir Harry Brewster. You will then, I

have no doubt, thank Heaven that you were not an orphan and your own mistress at the time when he had the impudence to propose to you. Meanwhile, the less said about him the better. I have been talking things over with Muriel, and my idea is that our best plan will be to leave England for a month or two. You have no idea what an old story this chapter in your life will seem to you when we return in the Spring."

"You may make any plans that you like, papa," answered Sylvia composedly, "and you can take me to any place that you please; but I shall not give up Sir Harry Brewster, and I don't think he will give me up."

Mr. Wentworth laughed.

"You have faith in yourself and faith in human nature," he remarked. "That is very pretty, and at your age it is very becoming. It can't hold out long against the hard facts of

existence, though. Well, I don't know that I have anything more to say. I couldn't say more without hurting your feelings, and I am sure I have no wish to do that."

"You wouldn't hurt my feelings by anything that you could say against Sir Harry, papa," answered Sylvia, as she dutifully kissed her father and wished him good-night; "I have heard it all from Lady Morecambe and other people, and I don't mind. It makes no difference."

The truth was that she understood that complacent philosopher a good deal better than he understood her, and was very well aware that he was incapable of persistent opposition.

If he congratulated himself upon the comparative smoothness with which their interview had passed off, so did she. He had seemed to gain his point; but in reality he had gained nothing except time, and that much it had been

certain that he must gain. As a matter of fact, time was her ally, and not her enemy.

Before she went to bed she wrote a letter to Sir Harry, wherein she gave a full account of the manner in which the news of her engagement had been received by those who exercised nominal authority over her.

"They did not scold me so much as I thought they would," she concluded, "and though their taking me abroad is a bore, it wasn't worth while to make a grievance out of that. Muriel is horrified; but I think I know how to manage Muriel. As for papa, he simply doesn't believe that anybody can care very much for anybody else. When he finds out that he is mistaken, he will sigh and shrug his shoulders and let me go my own way. That is what he always ends by doing, because he likes a quiet life. Of course you will have to call upon him, if only to show him that you are not ashamed or afraid.

The best time would be about eleven o'clock in the morning, when he has finished his breakfast and read the paper."

It is needless to quote further from a missive of which the wording was not quite so unimpassioned thoughout as in the above extract. It was not Sylvia's way to do things by halves, and, having given her whole heart to Sir Harry Brewster, she found it only natural to tell him without affectation of reticence how dearly she loved him.

The conscience of that elderly miscreant pricked him a little as he perused the girl's artless love-letter. To do him justice, fear was a sensation with which he had but scant acquaintance, and he was certainly not afraid of Mr. Wentworth; but as for not being ashamed —well, that was another affair. His remorse, no doubt, was somewhat tardy, and duty now commanded him to stand by Sylvia as imperatively

as it had commanded him a short time ago to avoid her; still, charitable persons may perhaps be disposed to count it as a sign of grace in him that he did feel remorseful. He told himself that he did not deserve her pure and unsuspecting affection; he likewise told himself that he would do what in him lay to deserve it for the future; and these unexceptionable sentiments made him, it must be confessed, a good deal more comfortable. For the present, his obvious course was to call in Upper Brook Street at eleven o'clock on the following morning, and this he did with strict punctuality.

Mr. Wentworth greeted him as a man whose confidence has been betrayed is justified in greeting his deceiver. More in sorrow than in anger, he dwelt upon the injury that had been done to him and to his daughter and regretted that one whom he had supposed to be his friend should have acted in such a manner as to render

a continuance of friendly relations between them impossible. Sir Harry, he said, would probably understand that the question of a marriage or an engagement could not even be discussed; the amazing thing was that such a suggestion should ever have been put forward.

"One does not quarrel with the ignorance of a child in her teens; but I think you must allow, Brewster, that I should have some right to quarrel with you if I were a quarrelsome man."

"My dear Wentworth," answered Sir Harry, "you have a right to say anything and everything that is bad of me. I can't even expect you to believe me when I tell you that I love your daughter; it was inexcusable on my part to tell her so, and I shall not attempt to excuse myself. But let me ask you, as a practical man —what, under the circumstances, is it that you would have me do?"

"Nothing, except to go away. I am sorry to be so discourteous; but you have left me no choice. For the matter of that, we also shall go away. I have decided to take Sylvia abroad for the rest of the winter."

"That is perhaps the best plan that you can adopt; but you will come home again, and if, as I firmly believe will be the case, she and I remain faithful to one another——"

"Really, Brewster," interrupted Mr. Wentworth in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "I think you might know better than to talk such nonsense as that to me."

"I assure you I am honestly persuaded that I am talking sense. I won't make protestations, because, as I said before, I can't expect you to believe me; but I suppose you will admit that so long as your daughter continues to be true to me I am bound to be true to her."

"I confess that I should not have imagined

you to be an upholder of that particular form of moral obligation. However, it is of no great consequence; because, wherever Sylvia may be, you cannot be permitted to approach her. The episode, in short, is at an end. You will very likely never see my daughter again; but if by chance you should meet, I trust that it will be a long time hence."

"I don't dispute your authority," answered Sir Harry, "although I may doubt whether it is in the power of any human being to enforce such a decision. You will allow me, perhaps, to see Sylvia for a few minutes, and to say good-bye to her."

"Certainly not. Why should I allow it?"

"I know of no reason why you should, although I think you might make that concession without danger. I will write to her then, and she can show you my letter, if you wish to see it. I shall say nothing, or very little, more

to her than I have said to you ; but I think I owe it to her to explain that I have not been cowed into deserting her. My position, you understand, is this. I cannot—especially in view of what my antecedents have been—persist in forcing my attentions against her father's wish, upon a girl who is still under age ; but I am entitled to tell her that, if she continues in the same mind, she may count on my fidelity."

"I am not sure," answered Mr. Wentworth, with a smile, "that you are entitled to tell her anything ; but probably your saying that will do no harm. After all, one must say something."

And indeed, it was in a very tolerant and self-satisfied frame of mind that this peremptory parent bowed his visitor out. His victory had been achieved with singularly little difficulty or unpleasantness, and he was beginning to think

that a trip to the South of France might not be quite such a nuisance as he had represented it to be. He spent the remainder of the morning in consulting guide books and railway time-tables, and became mildly interested in his studies. There were plenty of places, it seemed, which he had not visited and amongst which a few months might be spent agreeably enough. If the guide-books were to be trusted, creature comforts were obtainable at Pau, Biarritz, Nice, Cannes and numerous other winter resorts of invalided Britons.

"It is all settled," he told Muriel later in the day. "Brewster retires — under protest, of course—still he retires; and Father Time will now step in and perform his customary work. We are well out of it at the price of an expensive journey and a more or less dreary sojourn in foreign hotels."

Muriel intimated—as possibly she may have

been expected to do—that she was prepared to take the lion's share of the expense upon herself; but she was a good deal less sanguine than her brother as to results. Sylvia had always been wilful; but her wilfulness had hitherto been displayed after a very different fashion, and it was not a little disquieting to find that the girl had no complaint to make on being informed that Sir Harry Brewster had allowed himself to be turned out of the house without even insisting upon a farewell interview with her.

And when Sir Harry's promised letter arrived, Sylvia at once handed it to her aunt, merely remarking that it was the letter of a gentleman. It was a letter, Muriel thought, which had obviously been written with the knowledge that it would be inspected by others besides its recipient; but what was the use of saying that? Exception could not be taken to its terms, which

were scrupulously correct. The writer disclaimed any idea or intention of fettering the girl whom he loved and of whom he admitted himself to be utterly unworthy. He was bound, but she was free, and her freedom would never be interfered with, directly or indirectly, by him. He would only ask her to believe that his enforced absence and silence did not and never would imply any lessening of his love.

"It is quite hopeless and quite impossible, you know," Muriel said as she handed this admirably worded document back to its rightful owner.

"Would you think so if you were in my place and if you loved him?" inquired Sylvia quietly.

"Yes; I am sure I should. I might not be able to help loving him; but I should feel that it would be disgraceful to marry him while his wife was still alive."

"Well I suppose I am not as good as you

are; for I don't feel in that way about it at all. Lady Brewster, if that is what she calls herself, isn't his wife any longer, and he never cared for her, and he does care for me. That is all that I want to know. I don't mind his having been wicked; everybody is wicked in one way or another, and I daresay I am quite as bad as he is in reality, though I haven't had the chance of doing anything scandalous. I think I might become downright wicked if he were to abandon me to my fate; but he won't abandon me. He is willing to wait for me, and I am willing to wait any length of time for him."

Distressed though Muriel was by this speech (for of course nothing was more likely than that Sir Harry Brewster would abandon the girl who so blindly trusted him), she was nevertheless more drawn towards her niece by it than she had ever felt before. Sylvia, it seemed, was by no means the heartless and selfish flirt that she

had sometimes appeared to be; and although one might deplore her infatuation, it was impossible to help sympathising with her.

"Oh, my poor child," she exclaimed almost involuntarily, "I wish I could help you! I wish it were possible to give you what you want!"

"I know I can't have what I want at once," answered the girl; "but it is quite possible for you to help me, and I believe you will when you have got over the first shock of the thing. You are not like papa; you understand that I am in earnest."

Then the two women kissed each other, and there was a tacit agreement between them that the trouble which the younger had brought upon herself should at least be no longer made a subject of reproach by the elder. It will be perceived that Sylvia had indulged in no very extravagant boast when she had asserted that she knew how to manage her aunt.

Muriel, however, was not conscious of having taken any step towards countenancing an alliance which she still considered to be absolutely out of the question. What she did fully realise was that there was going to be a good deal more difficulty and a good deal more unhappiness over this affair than her brother imagined, and she foresaw that if she was to be of any service to Sylvia, she would have her work cut out for her for a considerable length of time to come. Meanwhile what was to become of the other work that she had undertaken?—and what would Mr. Compton think of a residence in continental watering-places as qualifying her for ultimate admission into the society of S. Francis?

Well, the shortest way was, no doubt, to ask him; and this she did on the earliest opportunity, though she could not refrain from answering for him before he had opened his lips.

"I know exactly what you are going to say," she declared; "you told me from the first that I had home duties to attend to and that I had no business to neglect them. Well, I don't mean to neglect them, you see; I don't mean to leave Sylvia until she is—consoled; but if you are at all fair, I think you will admit that I shall be sacrificing myself far more by consenting to a kind of life which I shall hate than I could be by working under you in London, which I should love."

"By what sort of hateful life do you propose to console your niece?" Compton inquired.

"Oh, by going as much as possible into society, I suppose, and by making as many new friends for her as we can. Don't you think that it is our best chance?"

"I am without the means of forming an opinion; but, from what you tell me about her, I should say that she might very probably beat

you. If her will is stronger than yours, and if Sir Harry Brewster behaves himself, this is what will happen. Some fine morning you will say to yourself that you can't bear to see people miserable, that you have money enough to overcome financial objections and that divorce, after all, is sanctioned by the law of the land. Then you will proceed to despoil yourself in favour of your niece and you will come to me to ask whether you haven't given as convincing proofs of unworldliness as any rules of ours could demand."

"You are very cruel and very unjust!" returned Muriel, the colour mounting into her cheeks. "You have no right to say that I shall act in that way, and one thing I can promise you—if I ever ask you again to let me join your Society, I will not come to you empty-handed."

Mr. Compton smiled. "You will not find me

cruel or unjust when you are empty-handed or in any real trouble," said he; "if I make cruel predictions now, it is only because I want to put you on your guard against verifying them. The danger is real, though you don't believe in it—we'll say no more on the subject. The children will miss you terribly, and you may be sure that we shall all welcome you if you care to come back to us on your return home."

This was cold comfort; but it was all that poor Muriel could obtain from her hard-hearted clerical adviser, and she was fain to make the best of it.

CHAPTER III.

ARTISTS who have reached a certain age—painters or musicians or whatever they may be—will remember that, in the days when they were still students and were ignorant of the existence of that great gulf which separates mere promise from proficiency, they had to pass through a period of profound discouragement and disappointment. Of students some are diffident from the outset, while others, whose intelligence moves more quickly, make light of preliminary obstacles and outstrip their competitors by sheer force of self-confidence. Teachers, as a rule, prefer the latter class, because there is better work to be got out of

them at starting, yet it may be doubted whether their lot is an enviable one. For sooner or later the inevitable time must come when they find out that they are only just beginning to face difficulties instead of being within sight of their goal, and the reaction which sets in after this discovery is fatal to not a few amongst them. Somewhat analogous is the lot of those who have fondly and prematurely imagined that they understood their own characters and knew exactly what they were worth. All of a sudden something occurs which opens their eyes; they see themselves as others see them; they realise that they are not in the least what they had supposed, that they do not possess the qualities upon which they had plumed themselves; and then, if they are in any degree sensitive or conscientious, they are very apt to jump to the conclusion that they are worth nothing at all.

Such, at any rate, was the melancholy con-

clusion at which Muriel Wentworth arrived when she reached home and pondered over the conversation of which a part was recorded in the last chapter. It was not that she believed in the fulfilment of Compton's prophecy; he himself had as good as admitted that he was only warning her against a possible danger, though he had called it a real one. But what hurt her was the idea that she was a person about whom a prophecy of that kind could be made, and what caused her to despair was an inward conviction that the keen-witted little Superior of the Society of S. Francis had not wholly misjudged her. He had always refused to take her seriously, and it might very well be that he had been right. Perhaps she was not of the stuff of which his followers must needs be composed: when she examined herself she felt almost sure that she was not. She had too many misgivings; she was too much given to

looking back after putting her hand to the plough; the world, in short, was a very complicated place of habitation, and it was no such simple matter to retire from it and all its complications. Of course she was determined that she would never under any circumstances be a consenting party to anything so monstrous as Sylvia's marriage with Sir Harry Brewster, yet something whispered to her that she was not altogether incapable of such criminal weakness, and so she lost faith in herself and in her strength of purpose. When all was said, what was she but a discontented woman who, for no better reason than that she was discontented, had fancied herself fitted to fill a more lofty position than the very commonplace and uninteresting one which had been assigned to her by Providence?

Self-knowledge is doubtless salutary; but self-distrust and self-disgust can do nobody any good; so that it was just as well for Muriel that

she was interrupted in the midst of these gloomy meditations by the entrance of a visitor who had always recognised and rendered full justice to her virtues.

"I thought I might venture to look in upon you, since your niece is away from home," Colonel Medhurst said. "You told me the other day that you didn't wish me to meet her."

"Did I? I only meant that you probably would not wish to meet her," answered Muriel. "She has come back; but she isn't in the room, as you see, and I'm glad of it, because I have something that I must tell you about her."

"Indeed?" said the Colonel, with a startled look. "Surely not that she—but I know that cannot be so. I spoke to your brother—perhaps he told you about it?—and although I could not get him to say that he would turn his back upon Brewster, he seemed to be quite alive to the fact that the man is a scoundrel. It is in-

conceivable that he can have consented to give his daughter to such a brute. Besides, she has been out of London."

"Yes; and so has Sir Harry Brewster. I had better tell you the truth at once, though of course we do not wish it to be talked about. Sir Harry deliberately followed Sylvia to Morecambe Priory, where she was staying, and he has proposed to her and she has accepted him. It is horrible and shameful; but that is what has happened, and I would rather that you heard of it from me than from somebody else—as I suppose you would have been almost sure to do, sooner or later. Naturally, James has forbidden the engagement and will not allow her to see Sir Harry again; still, I am afraid we must not flatter ourselves that the affair can be put an end to in that summary way. Sylvia submits after a fashion; but she declares that she will marry the man as soon as she is of age, and he

has given her a release which is nothing more than nominal. My brother is persuaded that it will be all right; I wish I could think so!"

Colonel Medhurst bit his moustache and frowned. Mr. Wentworth had apparently done his duty as a father; but that there should be any question of Sir Harry Brewster's according a release, nominal or otherwise, to the girl whom he had insulted by an offer of marriage was surely evidence that indulgence had been stretched a little too far.

"She can't possibly marry him, you know," he said, in a somewhat sharp tone of voice.

"I hope not," answered Muriel despondently; "but even if the marriage never takes place, her youth will have been spoilt all the same. What can we do? We are to go abroad immediately, and we shall be away for some months, I believe; but I don't know that the change will make much difference."

Colonel Medhurst's face fell. "You are going abroad?" he echoed disconsolately. "And when you return, I shall have gone back to my regiment, I suppose. Will you like it?—the going abroad, I mean."

"I? Oh, no, I shall not like it at all; but it is not on my account that we are going. Perhaps it is the best thing we can do for Sylvia, though it seems a doubtful sort of remedy. At all events, by taking her away, we shall prevent her seeing or hearing of Sir Harry Brewster."

"I should have thought you might have prevented that without leaving home. And it does seem to me that your wishes are entitled to *some* slight consideration. Won't it be rather a wrench to you to have to give up your visits to the children's hospital and—and all that?"

"Yes; but I am not sure that I mind quite so much as I thought I should. Although I liked being with the children and helping to

amuse them, that wasn't the kind of work that I could have gone on with for an indefinite time, and I never intended to stop short there. To tell the truth, I looked upon myself as a sort of probationer: but this afternoon Mr. Compton has completely undeceived me. He never had any idea of admitting me into the Society; he does not think me fit for it."

"Well, if you come to that," observed Colonel Medhurst, smiling, "nor do I. I think you are fitted for something better than such a life."

"That is absurd. What can be better than to give all that you possess—your money and your labour and your whole heart—to your fellow-creatures? Mr. Compton is convinced that I should never give my whole heart to them; and I can't feel certain that he is mistaken."

"I sincerely trust that he is not," declared Medhurst, who for the moment had forgotten all about Sylvia and Sir Harry Brewster, and who

was decidedly of opinion that a portion of Miss Wentworth's heart ought to be reserved for less general purposes; "it is easy to serve one's fellow-creatures without taking vows or wearing a poke-bonnet, and though the life of a Sister of Charity may be the best for some exceptional persons, I am sure it can't be the best for everybody."

"Exactly so. I fancied myself an exceptional person, whereas I am nothing of the sort, it appears. You and Mr. Compton may have judged me quite correctly; but I can't pretend to feel exhilarated by your judgment, and that is one reason why I don't so very much object to leaving the country."

"I understand," gravely observed Colonel Medhurst—who, however, did not understand in the least. "I am sorry that you should have been disappointed; but I confess I shan't be sorry if your disappointment causes you to give

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up the notions that you have had. I wish you weren't going away though!"

"Thank you; but I should imagine that there can hardly be another individual in London whose absence would be less noticed or less regretted. I am taking with me the only two human beings who want me; and it is doubtful whether even they are conscious of wanting me. There's no use in wondering; still I do wonder for what possible purpose I can have been sent into the world!"

Colonel Medhurst was deeply and honestly in love; but perhaps he had passed the age at which lovers are blind to any absurdities that can be uttered by the objects of their adoration. "All that," he exclaimed, laughing, "because Compton is wise enough and kind enough to forbid your taking a leap in the dark."

"No; not because of that, but because I feel that I am useless and that I always shall be use-

less. You, being a man, can't understand what I mean or what there is to make such a fuss about. A man has his profession; if he doesn't distinguish himself in it, at least it gives him work, and perhaps he doesn't particularly care about being distinguished. But women—or, at all events, women who are like me—must either be something out of the ordinary or else nothing at all. Is it a sign of inordinate vanity or ambition that I can't submit very cheerfully to the prospect of being nothing at all?"

"It is certainly no sign of vanity, and there isn't anything to be ashamed of in ambition. Only I should like to convince you, if I could, that the prospect before you is not in the least what you say it is."

Muriel shook her head. "I'm afraid you won't be able to do that," said she.

"I'll have a try, anyhow, though I know that

in about an hour's time I shall repent of having said what I am going to say. Now, Miss Wentworth, what is the matter with you is just this—isn't it?—that you think nobody cares for you. I wouldn't for the world accuse you of a yearning to be loved, which I suppose you would consider a very maudlin and schoolgirlish sort of sentiment; but when you come to think of it, it amounts to pretty much the same thing, and it's a wish which is common to all mortals, whether they admit it or not. You say you want to be of use; but isn't your real meaning that you want to feel yourself essential to somebody or other's happiness?"

"To the best of my belief, I only mean what I say," answered Muriel. "But Mr. Compton has put me out of all conceit with myself, and if you demonstrate to me that I am a humbug, you won't astonish me. Well; to whose happiness am I essential?"

"Oh, only to mine, so far as I know; but my reason for making that ridiculous confession—because of course it is rather ridiculous—is that it may suggest consolatory inferences to you. If, without making any effort to do so, and indeed without the faintest suspicion of what you have done, you can win the heart of an elderly, well-seasoned colonel of cavalry and can reduce him to such a condition of idiocy that he worships the very ground you tread upon, doesn't it seem to follow that you can win other people's hearts easily enough? Other people, you may be sure, will turn up. The right person may not be the first or the second or the third, but he will make his appearance some day, and when he does—well, I presume that you will feel very grateful to Compton and very thankful that you are not a Sister of Charity."

Never, perhaps, was a declaration of love

worded in a manner more awkward to respond to. Muriel was genuinely surprised and taken aback; but her annoyance was greater than her surprise. Colonel Medhurst, she thought, had no business to place her in so embarrassing a position. An offer of marriage may be declined, with suitable expressions of sympathy and regret; but what is to be said to a man who avows himself a lover, yet abstains from putting himself forward as a suitor?

"I can't imagine that you are speaking seriously," she said at length, in default of any better rejoinder.

"I am as serious as it is possible to be, although I don't wonder at your scepticism. Falling in love is what nobody can help: it may be a blessing or a misfortune, according to circumstances; but I don't deny that a man of my age who falls in love with a girl of yours deserves to be laughed at."

"Age has nothing to do with it," returned Muriel; "look at Sylvia and Sir Harry Brewster! Only——"

"Only if I were five-and-twenty, that wouldn't help me? Well, that may or may not be so; one can't tell. In any event, I am quite aware that I am not the right person of whom I was speaking just now, and I only mentioned my case by way of an example and an illustration. However, since I have mentioned it, I shan't make matters worse by dwelling upon it for one minute more. There is a sort of satisfaction, which I am sure you won't grudge me, in telling you what I believe to be the truth, that nobody can ever love you more than I do. I won't say that nobody will ever love you as much, because that would be nonsense, I suppose; but I want you, if you will, to let me be your friend still and to remember that if at any time I can be of service to you,

you will do me the greatest of kindnesses by telling me so. I shall be quartered at Colchester for the next two years in all probability. Now I'll say no more about myself. I wonder whether I have comforted you at all by letting you into my secret."

By this time Muriel had recovered her self-possession and was able to frame something in the shape of a fitting reply. She did not say that Colonel Medhurst's avowal had comforted her, nor did she think it worth while to point out to him how wide he was of the mark in his estimate of her requirements; but she assured him that she was not ungrateful for the high compliment that he had paid her, and she expressed the hope which every woman who refuses an offer is bound to express, that he would soon meet with somebody more worthy of his affection than she could pretend to be.

He made her feel somewhat ashamed of her

trite phrases by ignoring them and merely answering that his back was broad enough for his burden.

"As you said just now, a man has always his profession, and I have been tolerably lucky in mine, so that there is no great danger of my being superannuated. I shall reconcile myself to my fate somehow or other, and I hope and think that you will reconcile yourself to yours. Only, if I might ask a small favour of you, it would be that you will allow me credit for knowing my own mind."

She might have retorted that that was more than he had been willing to allow her; but she did not, and she cried a little after he had gone away. It was not that she regretted the refusal which he had taken for granted; she did not love him, and for marriage in the abstract she had no inclination. Still it seemed a great pity that she could not be satisfied with what would

satisfy the generality of women, and she was more sorry for herself than she was for the man who had proclaimed his ability to reconcile himself to his fate.

To grumble because one differs from the rest of one's species is, no doubt, a form of complaint to which the rest of the species find it difficult to listen with patience; yet we, who enjoy the blessing of being commonplace, should not be too hard upon those who do not share our advantages. After all, they are not to blame. Their peculiarities result from heredity or from the conformation of the skull or from some cause for which poor human nature cannot be held responsible, and we are still as far as ever from being able to answer that queer question, "Did this man sin or his parents that he was born blind?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE average young Englishman of the present period is, as all fair-minded observers will acknowledge, equal in respect of manly attributes to his predecessors. He is probably not much more of a fool than they used to be ; if he cannot be said to have made any great advance upon their intellectual level, he seems to have scored a point or two against them in a physical sense, and when called upon to fight he is seldom found wanting. There are, of course, exceptions ; but the smooth-shaven pseudo-sportsmen of to-day are not more representative of their class than were the Dundrearys of a former epoch, and a fair proportion even of these are, it may be,

formed of more solid stuff than might be inferred from their manners and appearance.

It was, for instance, far more poor Johnny Hill's misfortune than his fault that the greater part of his time was spent in loafing aimlessly about the streets of London, that he was a frequenter of music-halls, a diligent reader of sporting papers, and that he did what in him lay to earn the enviable reputation of being no end of a dog. In early life one must needs have ambitions of one kind or another, and that his had taken this somewhat ignoble form was chiefly due to circumstances beyond his control. His home was in London; he was very well off; he had passed through public school and university life without having the good luck to secure any friends whose friendship was worth possessing; he had a mother who worshipped him and of whose wisdom and knowledge he entertained, by one of those strange perversities for which

there is no accounting, an exalted opinion; finally, he was rather stupid and unaffectedly humble. Something might have been made of him if he had been put into the army; but nothing was likely to be made of him now, except an oaf—which indeed was the unflattering description that was too often given of him by his acquaintances.

It was the description that had always been given of him by Sylvia Wentworth, to whom, in all probability, he would never have dreamt of raising his eyes, had he not been urged thereto by maternal anxiety. Mrs. Hill rather liked being told that her son belonged to a fast set, and her pride was gratified when she heard that he was upon terms of intimacy with certain harum-scarum young noblemen; but as she did not wish him to ruin himself, even in aristocratic company, she had made up her mind that the best thing to do was to provide him as speedily

as might be with a charming wife, by whose aid he might hope to achieve social successes of a less perilous order. It was by her instigation that he had begun to pay his addresses to Sylvia, and of this duty he had at first, it must be confessed, acquitted himself grudgingly and of necessity; for, unassuming though he was, he did not particularly enjoy being snubbed, nor did the young lady find favour in his eyes. But by degrees his point of view underwent a change. Sylvia, who was nothing if not capricious, did not always snub him; sometimes—when she wanted to annoy somebody else—she even gave him marked encouragement; moreover, the difficulty of the task which he had taken in hand, and which became every day more perceptible to him, affected him as difficulty is apt to affect the majority of human beings. He was now as determined to win Sylvia Wentworth for his wife as a diffident and not over-sanguine youth could

be, and it had been of his own accord, not as the result of any promptings on his mother's part, that he had sought out Mr. Wentworth for the purpose of denouncing Sir Harry Brewster. His mother, in fact, knew nothing about Sir Harry Brewster, for he had refrained from mentioning that graceless personage to her, being aware that she was capable of serious indiscretions when excited, and fearing lest she should rush straight off to Upper Brook Street and say things which it would be more prudent to leave unsaid.

It was not from Mr. Wentworth that Mrs. Hill was likely to obtain any information upon the subject of Sylvia's escapade, but he did call upon her one afternoon for the sake of seeing what sort of a face she would make on being told that he proposed to take his family to the South of France for a few months, and the consequence of this visit was that her son found her much

agitated at breakfast time on the following morning.

"At what time did you come home last night?" she began. "Well, I won't ask; though I do think it must be injurious to health to keep such late hours. I sat up for you as long as I could; but one can't sit up until daylight. At least, I can't."

"Of course not," answered Johnny, "and I wish you wouldn't sit up for me. What's the good of it?"

"I wanted to see you, because I had some news to give you. Very unpleasant news too, I call it. Mr. Wentworth was here yesterday afternoon. He came to say good-bye; for it seems that they are all going abroad immediately and won't be back much before the summer."

"Quite right," muttered Johnny meditatively. "Very glad to hear it."

"Glad to hear it, you extraordinary boy! What do you mean? I do trust there has been no foolish quarrel between you and dear Sylvia."

"Oh, no; nothing of that sort," answered Johnny, somewhat confused; "but——but she isn't very strong, you know, and it's as well to get away from the spring east winds."

"Rubbish! she is as strong as I am; I never saw a girl with a better colour. Now, Johnny, mark my words: if Sylvia Wentworth leaves England without being engaged to you, it will be your own fault, and I won't answer for the consequences. You must remember that she has a fortune, or the prospect of one, and that there are sure to be plenty of needy fortune-hunters at such places as Cannes and Nice. The time has come for you to assert yourself, unless you wish to be elbowed out of the way by somebody else."

Johnny was by no means sure that he had not

already been elbowed out of the way ; yet he recognised that his mother's advice was sound in itself although offered in ignorance of all the circumstances, and he resolved to act upon it. If the worst came to the worst, he could lose nothing by having made his own position clear. Sylvia would very likely reject him ; but at least she should know that, whatever might happen, she would have his unalterable love to fall back upon. He therefore fortified himself with an additional glass of sherry at luncheon and immediately afterwards drove to Upper Brook Street, where, as he had anticipated would be the case, he ascertained that Mr. Wentworth, was at home. He was shown, at his request, into that gentleman's study and was offered a cigarette, which he declined. However certain one may feel of being refused, it is but prudent to refrain from smoking upon the eve of making an offer of marriage.

"It sounds rather rude to inquire what has procured me the pleasure of your visit," remarked Mr. Wentworth (who in truth could have answered his own question without any difficulty), "but you so seldom honour me in this way that I must plead guilty to a shade of curiosity."

"You remember what I said to you the other day," replied Johnny. "You advised me not to be in too great a hurry. Well I don't know that I should be in any hurry if there were time for me to feel my way; but it seems that there isn't. My mother tells me that you are going abroad, and I think I can guess why you are going."

Mr. Wentworth did not care to confirm or refute any conjectures that his visitor might have formed; but he smilingly acknowledged the accuracy of his information. "Oh, yes, we are going abroad," said he. "Is there any

particular reason why you shouldn't go abroad too?"

"With you, do you mean?" asked Johnny, flushing suddenly.

"Well, no, Pleasant as your company would be, I could hardly recommend in your own interests that you should offer it to us. But I should think that you might follow us without too much indiscretion. Every British citizen is entitled to travel in foreign lands, and a tolerably large number avail themselves of the privilege."

"Yes; but upon the whole I think I would rather speak before you go, and get it done with," answered Johnny doubtfully. "I daresay that may not be the best policy; but it seems to me to be the most straightforward. Is Miss Sylvia at home?—and may I see her?"

"I believe she is at home, and you can see her

in the drawing room, because Muriel has gone out. Only I warn you that you must be prepared for the results of precipitation."

"I am quite prepared for them," Johnny declared, "I only want her to know the truth. I'm not the sort of fellow to change my mind, and although I suppose she will have nothing to say to me now, a day may come when she will think differently about it. Anyhow, I mean to tell her that I love her before she leaves the country."

"As you please," returned Mr. Wentworth, ringing the bell. "I am quite inclined to agree with you as to the main question; I would only venture to suggest that for the present you should be content to accept such an answer as you may get, without inquiring too closely into motives."

Johnny was not so dull but that he could appreciate the significance of that hint; he had,

too, a rudimentary chivalry in his composition which would in any case have prevented him from pressing the girl whom he loved to make further confessions than she was disposed to make. Nevertheless, so unequivocal a confirmation of his fears was discouraging, and it was in a somewhat hopeless and dejected mood that he followed the butler upstairs.

Sylvia, who had been informed that Mr. Hill wished to speak with her, and who, of course divined his errand, was waiting to receive him in the drawing-room. Had he presented himself a week or two earlier, he would, doubtless, have met with rough treatment at her hands, for hers was not a temperament to sympathise with the sentimental woes of mankind ; but now that she was involved in love troubles of her own, her heart had become softened towards all fellow-sufferers, and she greeted this inadmissible wooer quite kindly.

"Have you come to say good-bye?" she asked. "You have heard perhaps that we are starting in a few days for some destination unknown? Papa has discovered all of a sudden that the climate of our native land isn't good for us, and we are to move into warmer latitudes."

Johnny signified that this was no news to him. "I came to say good-bye; but I wanted to say something more than that," he explained — for there seemed to be no use in beating about the bush—"I couldn't let you go without telling you what I daresay you don't need to be told—that I love you. Now I know just what you'll think: it's average impertinence of a plain-headed, dull-witted beggar like me to ask you to be his wife. But I'm not asking for that; I've sense enough to understand that you'd precious soon send me about my business if I did. The only thing I ask for is that you'll

bear me in mind. You see, one never knows what is going to happen, and things often turn out quite differently from what one expects, and I suppose that it isn't impossible that some day you may feel as if—as if you had better marry, though you may have no special fancy for one person more than another. And then perhaps you may say to yourself, 'Well, there's Johnny Hill. Not much to look at, and a first-class duffer at most things, but well-meaning in his way, and devoted to me. I might do worse than take him.' And, really, you might do worse; for it's something to have a husband who will never attempt to make himself out your superior; besides which, there are what your father calls my special advantages—meaning that I have a comfortable income to offer. So I hope you'll think of me in that way—as a second string, you understand."

Probably this was the very longest speech

that Johnny Hill had ever made in his life. It may not be considered a masterpiece of eloquence ; but it was really neither ill-conceived nor ill-expressed, since it produced exactly the effect upon its hearer that it was intended to produce. Sylvia quite understood all that he had left unsaid and appreciated the delicacy to which his reticence was due. She also appreciated his modesty and fidelity, little though such qualities appealed to her as a general rule. Still she did not herself care to be reticent, not being ashamed of her love for Sir Harry Brewster, and being unwilling to give anybody an excuse for imagining that she was ashamed of it. Therefore it was that she saw fit to reply :

" It is very good of you to speak as you do. I ought to be grateful to you, and so I am, and I am sorry if I have ever done anything to make you believe that I could possibly marry

you. But that is quite impossible, and I daresay Papa has told you why it it is impossible."

Johnny shook his head. "Oh, no," he answered; "Mr. Wentworth told me nothing, except that I hadn't much chance of success—and I knew that before."

"I thought he might have told you the truth; but, as he hasn't, I will tell you myself; I don't wish it to be kept secret. I am engaged to be married to Sir Harry Brewster, and if I don't marry him I shall never marry at all. Of course the engagement has been forbidden, and that is why we are going abroad; but they might just a swell have allowed me to stay at home. It will all come to the same thing in the long run."

Johnny looked grave and dismayed. "I didn't know that matters had gone as far as that," he remarked in a low voice.

"Well, you knew that they would go as far; I am sure you did from what you said just now. You meant me to understand that if I couldn't get what I had set my heart upon, and if I felt dull and miserable at home, I might fall back upon you. I hope I should never be such a wretch as to take advantage of your generosity; but that *was* what you meant, wasn't it?"

"Well, something of the kind," Johnny confessed. "Yes; that is really what I mean. Only I am very sorry that you have given Sir Harry Brewster a right to call himself engaged to you, because I don't see how such an engagement can ever come to anything, and I wouldn't trust him to hold his tongue about it."

"I don't want him to hold his tongue about it," Sylvia declared proudly; "so far as I am concerned, he is welcome to proclaim it from the housetops. He won't do that, though; for he is

a gentleman, and he considers me a great deal more than he does himself."

"Yet he asked you to marry him," observed Johnny, pertinently.

"No, he didn't. He told me that he cared for me, and I don't believe he would have done that if he hadn't seen that I cared for him. What is the use of blaming people for things that they cannot help? I shouldn't have fallen in love with a divorced man for choice, nor, I dare say, would he have fallen in love with a girl young enough to be his daughter; but one can't command one's feelings and one can't alter them. If you are sincere, you must know that from your own experience. You would be glad to put me altogether out of your head if you could, wouldn't you?"

Johnny pinched his lower lip between his finger and thumb dubiously; he was not certain that he would prefer the relief of oblivion to his

present forlorn condition, nor was he quite convinced that the human will is so feeble a force as Sylvia had represented it to be. But he agreed with her that there would be very little use in blaming either her or his rival.

"I think I had better go now," said he, rising and holding out his hand. "Mr. Wentworth was so good as to suggest that I might follow you abroad; but I shan't do that. It wouldn't help me, and would only worry you. However, it can't be any worry to you to know that your second string will be at your service as long as he lives, and, as I said before, a time may come when you won't be sorry to have a second string."

Sylvia, while taking his hand, assured him earnestly that that time would never come; it would be no kindness, she said, to allow him to delude himself with vain hopes. Nevertheless, he took his hopes, such as they were, away with

him and left behind him a better impression than he had any idea of. Probably there does not exist the woman who can remain wholly unmoved by the spectacle of desperate, disinterested fidelity — always supposing, that is to say, that she is herself its object.

"So Johnny Hill has been offering his hand and heart, and has been dismissed with a flea in his ear," remarked Mr. Wentworth to his sister, when he returned from the club before dinner.

"Yes," answered Muriel. "I am sorry for the poor boy, and so, to do her justice, is Sylvia. Did she tell you about it?"

"No; but the guileless Johnny called after luncheon to inform me of his intentions and to request that he might see her. My mother-wit enabled me to forecast the result of the interview. Well, he will live to fight another day, and I don't suppose he will have done himself any harm by this preliminary skirmish. I

recommended him to follow us to the continent, and no doubt his mother will spur him on to make that effort. In fact, I shouldn't wonder if she were to accompany him, which would be great fun. By the way, I rather think of trying Biarritz to start with. Have you anything against that plan?"

All places were the same to Muriel, and she said so. It occurred to her that all places were as much open to Sir Harry Brewster as to Johnny Hill; but this she did not say, knowing that the observation would not be well received. Mr. Wentworth was strongly averse to meeting trouble half-way, and he had evidently succeeded in persuading himself that he would have no more trouble with Sir Harry Brewster.

CHAPTER V.

In the days when a Spanish lady set the fashions and to some extent ruled the destinies of France, Biarritz, which was at that time, and is still, the favourite autumn resort of Spaniards, acquired a world-wide reputation. Indeed, with its little land-locked port, its fine stretch of sands and its exposure to the whole width of the Atlantic and every wind that blows therefrom, it is a pleasant enough bathing-place for sun-wearied southerners to find within their reach; but why the inhabitants of more northern climes should betake themselves thither during the winter months is one of those mysteries which can only be ex-

plained by the well-known eccentricity of the Anglo-Saxon race. It is very little warmer than Devonshire, it is quite as rainy and infinitely less beautiful; the district in which it is situated is barren and shadeless, its houses are, as a rule, badly built, and of course it is as impossible there as it is everywhere else in France to obtain firewood which will warm the room or even keep alight at all without constant attention. Yet a tolerably large contingent of English people have for many years past spent the cold months in that storm-vexed spot, and not a few of them are ready to affirm that they would rather do that than stay at home.

With these deluded beings Mr. Wentworth, bringing an unprejudiced mind to bear upon the subject, found himself quite unable to agree. The climate of Biarritz was, he admitted, a shade superior to the climate of London; but when he had said that (and the same might be

said of Brighton) what more was there to be urged in favour of the place? Certainly there was a club; but it was not much of a club; social entertainments were few and far between, nor did it greatly console him to be assured on all hands that as soon as Lent was over there would be plenty of dancing. He wanted to dine, he didn't want to dance, and he bitterly regretted the precipitation with which he had hired a villa for three months. Muriel, to be sure, had undertaken to pay the rent of the villa; but he did not feel himself any the less a fixture on that account. After all, one has a conscience, and there is such a thing as over-riding a willing horse. He could not propose to decamp forthwith; all he could do was to grumble, of which solace he did not stint himself.

Had he been less occupied with his own causes for dissatisfaction he might have noticed that his daughter was in no better case than he

was. Sylvia, in truth, was bored to death. It was not only that the acquaintances whom she had made or who had turned up in Biarritz failed to amuse her ; it was not only that she had nothing to do, except to take long walks—probably of all forms of physical exercise the most unserviceable and depressing—but it was beginning to dawn upon her that she had miscalculated her strength. It was one thing to feel sure of her fidelity to Sir Harry and another to count with equal confidence upon his fidelity to her, now that they were separated and deprived of all means of communication. In spite of herself, she could not help remembering what she had heard about his numerous love affairs ; she could not help doubting whether it was possible for her to be to him all that he was to her, and sometimes, while she lay awake at night, she was oppressed by painful misgivings as to what had at first seemed to her to be the

futility of the measures adopted by her relatives. Now, it is a very bad thing for young people to lie awake at night; it is still a worse thing for them to be careworn; and what perhaps is the very worst thing in the world for the health of both young and old is suspense. Sylvia, who had never been robust, distressed her aunt by growing thin and pale, as well as by the petulance of her temper, which had led her to spurn all efforts at sympathy and resent any allusion to her fragile looks. There was one subject, and only one, with regard to which sympathy would have been welcome to her; and upon that subject Muriel was not prepared to touch.

Yet what was to be done with the girl? What had been attempted was evidently not proving effectual, and the dread of that contingency which Compton had foreseen was ever present to her perplexed aunt. Cruel though it might be to hope for it, the best thing to hope for seemed

to be that Sir Harry might show himself worthy of the character which he had earned and might take up with somebody else.

Mr. Wentworth, at all events, was cynical enough to hold that opinion, and if any gossip to the above effect had reached his ears, he would have hastened to impart it to his daughter. In the absence of any such good news, he had to content himself with an article in a society paper, the writer of which, commenting upon the announcement that Sir Harry Brewster was about to retire from the turf and that his diminished stud would shortly be brought to the hammer, was pleased to dwell in a tone of virtuous severity upon the sins and follies of the ill-starred baronet. It was melancholy, this stern censor of public morality declared, to contemplate the wreck of a life which twenty years ago had seemed full of the brightest promise. Sir Harry Brewster had started with almost

every advantage that a fairy godmother could have bestowed upon him; he had had good birth, good looks, wealth and capacities which, if he had cared to make use of them, would probably have proved to be much above the average. He had chosen to squander his money, to devote all his talents to the equivocal purpose of trying to get the better of the ring, and as for his handsome face (now a thing of the past), the manner in which he had seen fit to turn that to account was, unhappily, only too notorious. It was impossible to feel any compassion for one who had so persistently shown himself his own enemy; but it was permissible to regret the degeneration and probable extinction of an ancient family.

Mr. Wentworth could not resist reading this admirable extract aloud to his sister and his daughter, whom he found sitting upon a couple of wicker chairs near the shore and trying to

persuade themselves that because they were in latitude 43 degs. north of the equator they were not shivering with cold.

"The Press is not over and above merciful to our friend Brewster," he remarked; "but who is merciful to a bankrupt? The first duty of every civilised being is to avoid bankruptcy."

Sylvia made no rejoinder; but Muriel, after a pause, observed that bankruptcy was not the only or the chief offence laid to Sir Harry Brewster's charge. She was sorry that her brother had been ill-advised enough to introduce a topic which would have been better left alone, and after he had strolled away she said so. "Only," she added, "I can't pretend to think that there was any injustice in the newspaper article."

"Who asks you to think so or pretend to think so?" returned Sylvia irritably. "What does it matter whether you think so or not? Papa is quite right; the one unpardonable crime

that he has committed is losing his money. But, you see, that is a crime for which I don't feel the slightest difficulty in pardoning him."

Muriel sighed. "And the others?" she asked. "Can you pardon those so easily?"

"Yes, of course I can, because he hadn't even seen me in those days, and they are over and done with. At least, I hope they are."

There was an interrogative ring about the last words which was not devoid of pathos and of which Muriel quite understood the meaning.

"Isn't it better not to hope when there is so little ground for hope?" was all she could bring herself to say by way of consolation.

Sylvia turned upon her half fiercely, half tearfully. "I knew you would say that!" she exclaimed. "You don't want me to marry him, and you think that if you can't carry your point in any other way, you may do it by making me jealous and suspicious. You are

wrong, though; for I am not such an idiot as you suppose."

Then, with the characteristic inconsequence of her sex, she suddenly burst out crying, and, between her sobs, besought her aunt to take her away somewhere—anywhere.

"I can't bear this horrible place any longer," she declared; "it is killing me! If I had something to do or something to see, it would be different; but here I can only think and think and—and sometimes horrid thoughts come into my head. I don't really doubt him, I would rather die than doubt him; but it is so dreadful to know nothing!" She broke into a somewhat hysterical laugh as she added, "Wouldn't you like to take a trip into Spain? I don't think I should; but at all events Spain has one immense merit—it isn't Biarritz."

Muriel was unable to hold out against that piteous appeal. It was doubtless desirable that

the poor girl should forget Sir Harry, and it might also be desirable that she should suspect him, since there was every reason for suspecting him; but it could not be desirable that she should make herself ill. Accordingly it was suggested, the same evening, to Mr. Wentworth that three or four weeks spent in Madrid, Seville and Granada would form an agreeable break in the monotony of their present existence, and Mr. Wentworth, on receiving comforting assurances as to the expense of the proposed journey, jumped at the suggestion. He had not liked to complain, he said, forgetting perhaps that he had complained pretty loudly, but he must confess that of all the beastly holes he had ever found himself in in his life, Biarritz was far and away the beastliest. Muriel could not possible long for a change more than he did.

So it came to pass that, a few days later, this

discontented trio set forth under the charge of an experienced courier for a country which can boast of infinite attractions and is replete with the small discomforts which in the eyes of travellers who, like Mr. Wentworth, value their personal well-being above all things, more than outweigh any enjoyment that can be derived from pictures or architecture or scenery. They spent a day at Burgos, and two of them admired the cathedral and visited the Cartuja, while the third bemoaned himself over the barbarous fare provided for them; then they went on to Madrid, where they found a comparatively luxurious hotel, and where Mr. Wentworth, in some degree comforted, proposed that they should remain for at least a week.

"You can't possibly do justice to the place in less time than that," he declared; "it takes every uneducated person a full week to appreciate Velasquez, and without incivility I may say that

you have neither of you received a thorough education in art. Then you will want to make excursions to the Escorial and Aranjuez, and I suppose it will be our duty to witness a bull-fight. Besides, how do we know what horrors await us further south? Let us at least fortify ourselves by a course of moderately decent dinners before we start again upon this voyage of adventure and discovery."

He met with no opposition from the ladies, to both of whom it was in truth a matter of indifference whether they were at Madrid or Seville. They were not in a mood for sight-seeing; yet sight-seeing gave them an occupation if it did not precisely furnish them with entertainment, and the colour began to return to Sylvia's cheeks after a day or two of the hard labour which their conscientious courier would not permit them to shirk.

That benevolent tyrant refused to listen to

their prejudiced remonstrances upon the subject of bull-fights. In every country, as he justly pointed out, there exist national sports, and it is not more cruel to kill a bull than to kill a fox or a hare. The horses?—well to be sure, it was not very pretty to see the poor horses dying, and many ladies disliked it; but they were only broken down old animals, doomed to be slaughtered by the knacker even if they escaped the horns of the bull. He concluded by affirming, truly or untruly, that no English lady ever passed through Madrid without paying at least one visit to the Plaza de Toros.

Influenced by these representations, the two English ladies with whom this narrative is concerned took their places one Sunday afternoon, amongst several thousand other spectators, in the amphitheatre which is as essential to the existence of the Madrileños of to-day as ever

the *circenses* were to the Roman populace of old. A bull-fight is probably a degrading spectacle. It may not be actually more cruel than battue-shooting; but there is certainly a difference as regards moral effect between what is generally understood in this country by sport and merely looking on at an encounter in which some animals are sure to meet with a painful death, while several human beings may possibly do so. Perhaps, too, the size of the animals engaged should be taken into account; for it is never wise to familiarise crowds with the sight of blood. At the same time, it is only fair to admit that those who have succeeded in overcoming (and nothing is more easily overcome) the physical sensation of faintness, which may have been bestowed upon them by Nature as some protection against their ferocious instincts, are not likely to get much additional harm from witnessing the final struggle between the

matador and the bull. An infuriated bull is an ugly customer; to despatch him artistically, or even to despatch him at all, is a feat demanding great skill, nerve and presence of mind. These are manly qualities; the exhibition of them can hardly be demoralising, and although in nine cases out of ten the result of the duel is, of course, a foregone conclusion, it may be hoped that such is not the view taken of it by the bull, who, when all is said, is killed in no unmerciful or inglorious fashion.

However, Muriel Wentworth will never be able to deliver a dispassionate judgment upon the point; for when she had seen three horses disembowelled she could bear it no longer and had to be taken back to the hotel by the courier, who was much annoyed at being thus defrauded of his afternoon's amusement. Sylvia, though sickened, managed to stand to her guns, and

her philosophical father experienced no inconvenience.

"It is a butchery," he remarked; but butcheries take place every day in the shambles with our full consent and approval. Muriel, I imagine, is not more tender-hearted than you and I; she is only afflicted with a rather weaker stomach."

They accordingly saw two bulls killed and were to some extent infected by the frenzied enthusiasm of their fellow-spectators, although they scarcely knew enough about the conditions of the combat to appreciate the display of courage and dexterity which had evoked it. But the third bull was sulky and gave trouble. He would not play the game; he refused to charge when he was expected to charge, and he had to be goaded and tormented before his spirit could be aroused. All this was not very pleasant, nor, when the beast had been maddened up to

the required point, were the results such as could have been wished. The wearied horses, whom their riders made no effort to protect, were gored one after the other in a manner which caused even the case-hardened ladies in the mantillas to put up their fans, and when an overthrown picador had been carried, dead or insensible from the arena, Sylvia suddenly started up, saying that she had had enough of it.

"Very well," answered her father, looking somewhat alarmed and a good deal vexed. "I'll take you away then; only for the love of Heaven don't be so inconsiderate as to faint! Remember that I can't speak a word of the language and that that fool of a courier, who ought to have been back long ago, isn't in sight. I suppose we shall be able to get a vehicle of some sort or kind outside."

Sylvia was by no means sure that she was not going to faint. She stumbled after Mr.

Wentworth, who hastily made his way down to the entrance of the bull-ring, and could do no more than nod when he asked her whether she was capable of remaining upon her feet for a few minutes while he went to look for a carriage.

But one kind of emotion is often cured by another, and a shock was in store for Sylvia which at once banished all memory of bulls and mangled horses and picadors from her mind. For it was Sir Harry Brewster's voice that whispered in her ear, "Don't be frightened; I'll take care of you until your father comes back." And it was Sir Harry Brewster's face that was close to hers, and his arm that was extended, as though to support her. But no such support was necessary.

"You!" she exclaimed, the colour rushing back to her cheeks and lips—"Oh, how glad I am! Where have you come from?" Then,

recollecting herself, she added, "But you ought not to be here, ought you?"

He laughed a little and shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly.

"No; I ought not; but what would you have? All my life I have been doing things that I ought not to have done and leaving undone the things that I ought to have done. How am I to explain it all? I suppose they wouldn't let me call upon you?"

Sylvia shook her head despondently.

"Oh, no," she answered, "I am quite sure they wouldn't. But I *must* see you once; I want to hear—I want to tell you—oh, I can't help its being wrong! Can you be at the picture-gallery to-morrow afternoon between three and four? I think I could persuade Muriel to leave me there, because she is going to visit some orphanage or other; but of course I can't promise."

"I will be there at all events, upon the chance," he answered.

"Then go away quickly now before Papa sees you. I am quite well; I don't require anybody to look after me. Go at once, or you will ruin everything."

Sir Harry obeyed only just in time; for now Mr. Wentworth hurried up, saying:

"I've secured a shandrydan; come along, Sylvia. Well, I'm glad to see that you are looking a little less ghastly than you did; but I shall not be found escorting two women to view the favourite pastime of this enlightened land again."

CHAPTER VI.

THE Museo of Madrid contains, as everybody knows, one of the finest collections of paintings in the world, and Mr. Wentworth had been quite justified in representing that a week is not too long a time to devote to the study of its treasures. But it was not of Murillo or Velasquez that Sir Harry Brewster was thinking as he uneasily paced the gallery in fulfilment of his tryst with Sylvia Wentworth, nor in truth did he bestow a single glance upon the works of those great masters of their art. What he was thinking of, and what made him decidedly uncomfortable, was that he was about to commit

an underhand and dishonourable action; for he was, after a fashion which it is unnecessary to analyse, an honourable man. He would have been the first to admit that he was an unscrupulous sort of sinner; but he was hampered—who is not?—by a few scruples, and he could not behave as he was now behaving without doing violence to one of these. Yet he had not been allowed much choice in the matter; it had been Sylvia, not he, who had made an appointment which he almost hoped that she might be prevented from keeping, and by his way of thinking, it would have been altogether out of the question to meet her with a refusal.

But it must be confessed that all his doubts and self-reproach were forgotten when, after waiting for a quarter of an hour, he saw the slim, girlish figure which of late had always been present to his mental vision advancing towards him with quick steps. He knew now how

terribly disappointed he would have been if she had not come, and he said as much while he pressed her hand and drew her away to a bench as secluded from public observation as any that he could discover.

"Ah, you might have been sure that I would come," she answered. "I was afraid that there would be some bother about it, but fortunately there was none. Muriel knows that orphanages are not in my line, and she believes that pictures may be. If the carriage doesn't come for me in an hour, I am to find my own way home; so it is all right. Now tell me what extraordinary chance has brought you to Madrid."

"There's nothing very extraordinary about it," Sir Harry replied. "I came here to see you, and I came because I found that I couldn't live without seeing you—that's all. I went to Biarritz, knowing that you were there, and thinking that

I might perhaps get a glimpse of you now and then—for I give you my word of honour that I never meant to accost you—and when I heard that you had left for Spain I followed. My meeting you yesterday was a pure accident; I shouldn't have thought of speaking to you if I hadn't been really afraid that you were going to faint."

Sylvia took no heed of his apologies; apologies might be due to her father, but for her own part she did not require them.

"Is that really true?" she asked, for the pleasure of hearing him say it again; "couldn't you really live without seeing me? Well, do you know, that is just how I was beginning to feel myself. It seemed to me that unless I could see you again I should die."

Sir Harry made the reply which everybody else in the world, good, bad or indifferent, would have made. These two persons were doubtless

culpable; they had no business to be exchanging vows of eternal fidelity; they had bound themselves tacitly, if not in so many words, to refrain from doing anything of the kind; but they loved one another, and it would be absurd to demand of any mortal couple, so situated, that they should meet without reiterating, at great length, what both of them already knew. Of the two, Sir Harry appeared to be the more conscientious; for, after a considerable lapse of time, he said:

"This is all wrong, you know. If Mr. Wentworth were to walk in here all of a sudden, I should look uncommonly like a scoundrel."

"He won't walk in," answered Sylvia, composedly; "he has received a batch of newspapers from England and he has fallen asleep over them. Besides, people shouldn't expect impossibilities. I thought I could get on for two or three years without a sight of you; but I find

that I can't——and you can't get on without a sight of me. After all, what harm can there be in our meeting, since separating us doesn't make us forget each other?"

"Well, we know that separating us is useless; but others, naturally enough, don't agree. Anyhow, I think we ought to be open and aboveboard about it. How would it be if I were to go straight back to your hotel with you now, and tell your father exactly how matters stand? Most likely he has discrimination enough to understand that I am not a liar, and he will believe that I didn't come to Madrid with any intention of arranging clandestine meetings. Of course he will forbid me to dog your steps; but then I shall answer frankly that I won't undertake to be within reach of you and to look the other way if accident should bring us together. I don't know that it will be altogether fair of me to make such a speech; but at least it will be

straight, and, after making it, I shall feel that I am deceiving nobody."

This was essentially a man's view; perhaps Sylvia did not differ very greatly from the rest of her sex in that it struck her as a ridiculous and unpractical one. She protested against it with great vehemence and earnestness; she said (and this was obviously the fact) that the only effect of defying Mr. Wentworth in such a manner would be to exasperate him and to condemn her to a life of virtual imprisonment.

"And we are not really deceiving him," she urged; "we told him from the first that he would not be able to part us permanently. The only difference is that he hasn't been able to part us even temporarily."

Then she brought forward her own plan of action, which was not devoid of temptation to an easily tempted man. In a few days they would be moving southwards; they were to spend

some time at Seville, Granada and Cordova; what was to prevent Sir Harry from visiting these historic cities? And, if by the kindness of the Fates, an opportunity should offer for some surreptitious meeting in the Alhambra or the Alcazar, what injury could be done to any human being by two true lovers availing themselves of it? A cynic might have been tickled at the spectacle of a middle-aged man of the world allowing his better judgment to be overruled by the sophistries of a girl in her teens; but Sir Harry Brewster was not a cynic, added to which, very few men have a sufficiently keen sense of humour to derive amusement from their own weaknesses. He ended by yielding, though he did not disguise the reluctance with which he yielded.

"We are sure to be found out sooner or later," he remarked, "and I can't help thinking that the sooner we are found out the better."

"For you perhaps it might be, but not for me," returned Sylvia. And indeed it was obvious that there was a grain of truth in that assertion.

Meanwhile, their present interview was perforce brought to an end by a solemn official who came to announce to them that the gallery was about to be closed for the day.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Sylvia, glancing at her watch, "I had no idea how late it was. The carriage must have been waiting ever so long. Don't come to the door with me, please. If the coachman saw us together he would very likely tell the courier, who would tell papa, and then I should be cross-examined. Good-bye till we meet again at Seville; I will find some way to send you a note or a message there."

Sir Harry accepted his dismissal and fell back among the other visitors who were now trooping

out of the building. He did not, however, lose sight of Sylvia; so that, on reaching the entrance, he perceived that there was nobody there to receive her and that she was looking about in perplexity.

"Haven't they sent for you?" he asked, stepping up to her side.

"Oh, they must have sent," she answered; "but I can see no sign of the carriage. I daresay the man got tired of waiting. Well, I must stay here till it pleases him to come back, that's all."

"You can't possibly stand about in this bitter cold," Sir Harry returned; for indeed one of those icy winds which render the climate of Madrid about the most dangerous in Europe had begun to sweep down from the Guadarramas, and was driving clouds of dust before it.

Sylvia, who had omitted to provide herself with a wrap, shivered. "Then I will walk

home," she said. "It is no great distance, and I can't mistake the way."

Sir Harry agreed that that was the best thing to do; only he would not hear of her walking through the streets of Madrid alone. In Spain ladies were never allowed to go out unattended, he declared, and he must insist upon seeing her safely as far as her hotel. There was really no danger in his doing so; for neither her father nor her aunt were in the least likely to have left the house in such weather.

Sylvia did not quite like it; still, of two evils, the less seemed to be that she should take advantage of the escort offered her. She hurried her companion along at the top of her speed, being anxious to reduce the period of risk within as narrow limits as might be, and anxious also, if the truth must be told, to escape from the furious, piercing wind, which made conversation almost impossible.

Now it so happened that the coachman, who had been sent to fetch her, had some time before this experienced a similar natural anxiety. He had therefore driven back to the hotel to report the *señorita* was not at the Museo, and to inquire whether she had returned home. Thus it came to pass that when Sir Harry and his charge arrived in the Puerta del Sol, they ran full tilt against Muriel, who, on the receipt of the above intelligence, had hastened downstairs and was in the act of entering the carriage to proceed in search of her missing niece. She was too much amazed and horrified to say a word; she could only stare interrogatively at Sylvia, who was also struck dumb by this most untoward encounter. But Sir Harry was neither confused nor greatly distressed. Being, as he had already stated, convinced that discovery was only a question of time, he was not sorry to

be detected while there was still comparatively little to confess.

"You must try to forgive me, Miss Wentworth," said he, smiling. "I met your niece in the picture-gallery, and as she was unable to find her carriage, I could do no less than offer to see her home. Of course I could neither leave her there standing in the cold nor let her walk back all by herself."

This was putting the case as well as it could be put; but the explanation failed to satisfy Muriel, who guessed from Sylvia's scared look that there must be more behind.

"You met her at the gallery?" she repeated gravely. "Do you mean me to understand that you meeting her there was a mere accident? How is it that you are in Madrid at all?"

Thus challenged, Sir Harry spoke out plainly. "I am here because I heard that you were

here," he replied. "You probably won't believe me, but it is nevertheless true that my only object in following you abroad was to obtain a chance glimpse of Sylvia, every now and then, from afar. I had no intention of speaking to her; but circumstances, as you see, have been too strong for me."

"I am not at all surprised at your having followed us, Sir Harry," returned Muriel, coldly —for indeed she did not believe his word and was highly incensed against him—"it is no more than I expected of you. I think you have behaved in a very unmanly and ungenerous way; but that also is only what might have been expected of you. I shall not make any appeal to you; it would be a waste of breath. All we can do to protect ourselves from this persecution is to prevent Sylvia from meeting you again."

With that she turned and left him, drawing

her niece, whose arm she had taken, into the hotel with her.

It was about half an hour later that Mr. Wentworth, who had been dozing peacefully before the fire in his sitting-room, was aroused from slumber by his sister, who said in a determined voice: "James, we must leave this to-morrow."

"Must we?" he returned, with a yawn. "Well, if you say so, I suppose we must, though it will be very easy to go further and fare worse. But may I ask why we are to depart in such a desperate hurry?"

"Because Sir Harry Brewster is here, and because he met Sylvia by appointment at the picture-gallery this afternoon. She has confessed that she made an appointment with him, although he led me to believe that they had met accidentally, and the worst of it is that neither he nor she are in the least ashamed. The only

thing we can do is to start for Seville. No doubt he will follow us ; but at least, now that we are forewarned, we can take care that he doesn't speak to Sylvia."

Mr. Wentworth was now wide awake, and when he had heard all that Muriel had to relate to him, he expressed his great surprise that Brewster should have been guilty of such ungentlemanlike conduct. " But I think," he added, " that we can checkmate our friend by means of a very simple stratagem. Of course he has been told that we are bound for Seville, and I shall give Sylvia to understand that that is our destination ; only when we get to the railway station I shall make so bold as to change my mind and take tickets for Biarritz. How long we shall remain there after our return it will be for you to decide ; but at all events we shall gain time by this little innocent manœuvre, and I am glad to think that

Brewster will have the expense and fatigue of a fruitless journey. Meanwhile, if you send Sylvia to me, I will endeavour to give her the scolding that she deserves."

Mr. Wentworth was not quite the best man in the world at scolding. When he was put to personal inconvenience he was angry, and under such circumstances he could say disagreeable things; but, much as he disliked Biarritz, he thought that the appliances of civilization would be more readily obtainable there than at Seville; so that he was not seriously annoyed at being compelled to retrace his steps. Moreover, duplicity did not shock him particularly, and he was, in his own way, fond of his daughter. Therefore it was that Sylvia met with much more lenient treatment at her father's hands than she was entitled to expect.

He said that this sort of thing was really a great deal too bad. It was unladylike, it was

improper, and it must not occur again. Indeed, he would take upon himself to assert that it should not occur again. He wished to hear no excuses and would be influenced by no arguments; he intended to leave for Seville on the following day, and she would be so good as to make her arrangements accordingly.

Sylvia, who, as we know, had already made her arrangements, felt that nothing could become her so well as silent submission. She had got out of this awkward scrape far more easily than she had ventured to anticipate; she had not been asked to bind herself by any promise with regard to the future, and she inwardly resolved that it should be no fault of hers if she did not contrive to exchange a few words with her lover in one of the southern cities to which it had been signified to her that she was about to be removed. After all, Sir Harry had perhaps been right: fortune favours the

audacious, and open war is, in some respects, preferable to the wiles of diplomacy.

Mr. Wentworth, however, had the laugh on his side when the train began to move out of the station on the morrow, and when he politely directed his daughter's attention to the fact that they were shaping their course due north.

"Merely a little measure of precaution," he remarked. "I feel persuaded that neither you nor Brewster can have contemplated coming across one another again in Andalusia; yet, since there seemed to be a chance of your doing so without thought or design—which would have been embarrassing for you both—I thought we might as well trot humbly back to Biarritz."

CHAPTER VII.

It is a truism, and a somewhat melancholy one, that our minds lie at the mercy of our bodies, and that any trifle which may happen to throw the complicated organism wherein we are imprisoned here below out of gear has power to affect our hopes, our fears, our wishes and our anticipations to an extent against which there is little use in struggling. Sylvia Wentworth would doubtless have been a good deal more vexed and angry, on being informed of the trick which had been played upon her, had she not been preoccupied by the circumstance that she was in for a very bad cold. She had been

chilled through and through on the previous day; symptoms with which everybody has good reason to be acquainted were beginning to assert themselves; she felt as sincerely sorry for herself as everybody feels when suffering from the lassitude and heaviness which precede catarrh, and she also felt as sure as everybody feels at such times that she would obtain no sympathy from those about her. Under these depressing circumstances she could not distress herself very greatly at the thought that Sir Harry Brewster would scour Andalusia for her in vain; it was bad enough to have the prospect of a long night's journey before her. Sufficient unto that night was the evil thereof; it would be time to recur to other sources of sorrow when she should be in bed at Biarritz, with her nose swollen to twice its natural size and a mustard plaster upon her chest.

In the meantime, she conceived that she had

every right to make herself disagreeable to her travelling companions, and she did so. She neither slept herself nor suffered her aunt to sleep. She knew, she said, that she was going to be very ill; not improbably she might die, and if she did, Muriel would have the satisfaction of knowing what had killed her. The night was cold, the railway-carriage was draughty; it was mere mockery to offer her lumps of sugar saturated with camphor. Anybody who had taken the trouble to look at her might have seen that she was not in a fit state to travel; but it was too late now, and all she asked was that she might be left alone.

As a matter of fact, she asked a good deal more. All her life she had been in the habit of exacting constant attention when she felt indisposed, and all her life that attention had been conceded to her as her due. Muriel bore patiently with her ill-temper now, feeling that

it was excusable. A cold in the head is no such very grievous calamity, but a heartache is less easily cured, and, bad as Sylvia's conduct had been, some allowance had to be made for the fact that her heart was in all probability aching. She might be pardoned and pitied for imagining herself at the point of death, even though such a stretch of imagination might be intrinsically ridiculous.

The girl, however, was really ill, and when the return of daylight showed her flushed cheeks, her aunt became seriously uneasy about her. It was useless to say anything to Mr. Wentworth, who slept placidly until the frontier was reached and then averred that he had not closed his eyes; but it was now beyond a doubt that Sylvia was threatened with something worse than a mere cold, and the long delay and change of carriages at Irun did her no good. On arriving at Biarritz she was in a high fever; insomuch that the

first thing to be done was to get her to bed and send for the doctor. The servants, who had only a few hours before been warned by telegram of the return of the family, had omitted to light fires in the bedrooms; the house was miserably cold; the sheets were not properly aired; there was nothing except bread and butter to eat; and Mr. Wentworth, completely thrown off his balance by so comfortless a reception, swore that he could endure this sort of thing no longer. Come what might of it, he would start for England the very next day.

The doctor, who was soon upon the spot, and to whom, after he had examined his patient, the above determination was expressed in vigorous language, answered rather sharply that there could be no immediate question of a journey to England or anywhere else.

"Your daughter's condition is not at all satisfactory, Mr. Wentworth," said he. "I

cannot tell yet what this will turn to; but both her pulse and her temperature are far higher than they ought to be, and you may depend upon it that, at the best, she will not be able to leave her bed for a week."

On the following day things were very much worse. The doctor then unhesitatingly pronounced the case to be one of congestion of the lungs. He must await further developments before stating whether this was or was not complicated by some kind of low fever; but there were indications which pointed that way. Meanwhile, he wished it to be understood that the young lady's state was critical.

"And she has no stamina—no stamina at all," he added, in the accusing sort of tone which doctors so often assume when making such announcements.

Muriel was in consternation; and so, to do him justice, was Mr. Wentworth. He would

cheerfully have consented to forego his dinner for a month if by such a sacrifice he could have restored his daughter to health; and it would be impossible to describe the depth of his affection more forcibly than that. Sylvia herself was not frightened. At times she was light-headed, but when in possession of her senses she did not fear for her life. Her one idea was that this illness might be turned to good account, and she never wearied of imploring Muriel to send for Sir Harry Brewster.

"If I could only see him, I believe I should get well," she declared; "and if I am not to get well, what harm can my seeing him do?"

These representations might very likely have proved effectual—for Muriel, in her distress and alarm, was ready to consent to almost anything—but for the circumstance that Sir Harry's whereabouts could not possibly be ascertained. It seemed best, therefore, to reply with vague

and soothing promises, of which the invalid did not fail to take note. She was backed up by the doctor, to whom she managed to convey a hint, and who said meaningly that if his patient had any sort of mental worry or anxiety, nothing ought to stand in the way of its being removed.

Now, it so happened that Sir Harry, in defiance of all the laws of chance, had not taken his ticket for Seville. He was a man who seldom left more than he could help to chance; he had thought it extremely likely that a change of plans might be brought about by the events which have been narrated, and, as the result of certain inquiries, he had found out, not only that the Wentworths had quitted Madrid, but that they had departed by the night mail for France. That being so, what wiser course could he adopt than to follow their example? Personally he had no wish to visit the South of Spain; his

only wish was to see Sylvia once more, and he was not sure that loyalty to her did not command him to gratify it. Mr. Wentworth, no doubt, would be justified in calling him by very ugly names if he should take up his quarters at Biarritz; but on the other hand, it had to be taken into consideration that he owed more to Sylvia than he did to Mr. Wentworth, and that if he went straight back to England, she might suspect him of having faint-heartedly abandoned her to her fate. As a sort of compromise, he finally decided to break his northward journey at Bayonne, where in all probability he would be able to obtain some news of her, without letting her relations know that he was in their neighbourhood.

It is unnecessary to add that within twenty-four hours of his arrival at his destination he was a passenger by the little steam-tramway which connects Bayonne with Biarritz. There

is a thirteenth-century Gothic Cathedral at Bayonne; but there is not much else to look at, and Sir Harry Brewster had never pretended to be a judge of architecture or to be interested in Cathedrals. It was simply out of the question for him to spend the whole day in loafing about the streets of a French country-town: moreover, it did not follow that by whiling away a few hours in the adjacent watering-place he must needs encounter any member of the Wentworth family.

He had not, however, progressed very far on his way from the railway station to the *plage* before he found himself face to face with one of them. Muriel emerged from the chemist's shop where she had been to leave a prescription, just as he passed the door, and he would have been greatly surprised had she confessed the truth which was that the sight of him lifted a load of anxiety from her mind. She did not tell him that; but she paused, instead of passing on, as

she might have been expected to do, and she interrupted without ceremony the halting apology upon which he embarked.

"I knew you would catch us up either here or elsewhere," she said impatiently; "you did not make any secret of your intentions and I made none of my opinion about them. But all that is of no consequence now. You can stay at Biarritz if you choose, and you can search the whole place for Sylvia. You will not meet her, because she is in bed and dangerously ill."

Sir Harry started back.

"Do you mean that," he asked, "or do you only say it to frighten me? Is it really true that her life is in danger?"

"The doctor thinks so. She was not well when we went to Madrid, and she caught cold that day when she met you at the gallery. I don't know whether I am wise in saying what I am going to say; but I dare not leave it unsaid.

She is always asking for you ; she declares that if she could see you she would get well, and it is just possible that that may be so. At any rate, I shall tell her that you are in the place, and if she grows worse, I will take the responsibility of sending for you upon myself. At which of the hotels are you staying ? "

Sir Harry replied that he was staying at Bayonne, but that he would at once telegraph orders for his luggage to be sent on to the Hôtel d'Angleterre. He added, with a touch of emotion which was evidently sincere : " You are very kind to me, Miss Wentworth. I know that I don't deserve your kindness ; but I hope I may be able to show you some day that I am not quite so unworthy of it as you suppose."

" I have no wish to be kind to you," Muriel returned ; " setting everything else aside, the fact must always remain that your wife is still alive, and nothing would ever reconcile me to

an engagement between you and Sylvia. I can't allow a chance of saving her life to slip through my fingers, that is all. Now I must go. If you don't hear from me, you will understand that she is better—in which case I could not be concerned in bringing you together."

"I fully understand that," answered Sir Harry humbly; "but I trust you will see no objection to my making inquiries at your door. After all, you cannot doubt that I love your niece, and you must be aware of what torture suspense will mean for me."

Muriel made the required concession, not over graciously, and, after answering some eager questions as to the nature of the disease and the condition of the sufferer, left him. As a matter of fact, she did not believe that this man loved Sylvia in any true or worthy sense; but she thought it probable that he cared

enough for the girl to be made miserable by the absence of any tidings of her, and there was nothing to be gained by making him miserable. Let him come to the door as often as he pleased, if only he could be prevented from crossing the threshold!

But it is needless to say that such a prohibition was virtually impracticable. The thin end of the wedge had been inserted, and what followed was what invariably does follow, when once that initial difficulty has been overcome. Sylvia's joy on learning that her lover was within reach of her was only equalled by the persistency with which she pleaded that he might be admitted into the sick-room.

"Do you want to kill me?" she asked. "Well, you *will* kill me if you refuse to let me see him. You don't understand—you are too cold-hearted to understand how I long for him. All I ask is to be allowed to talk to him alone for a few

minutes. Then, if I die, I shall at least have told him some things which he will remember after I am gone, and if I recover—why, all will remain as it was. You can't do any real good by inflicting this pain upon us both."

Many excellent reasons might have been given for turning a deaf ear to such entreaties; but it was not easy to state these or to resist pleas which were interrupted by prolonged fits of coughing. Muriel, knowing full well that she was beaten, could only take counsel with her brother, who proved himself no very valuable counsellor. Mr. Wentworth was distressed and unnerved; he heartily wished Sir Harry Brewster at the devil, and he said so; but he complained pettishly that he was being driven into a *cul-de-sac*.

"You are determined to throw the whole responsibility upon my shoulders," he remarked; "but what am I to do, I should like to know?

You agree with me that the man is impossible and that Sylvia can never be allowed to marry him; yet you ask me to let her do a thing which you know as well as I must compromise her. It is a case of life or death, you say? Well, if you and the doctor will take upon yourselves to affirm that, I don't see how I can hold out against you. But I give in under protest—mind that!—and nothing will induce me to sanction an engagement."

The matter was debated a little further; the doctor was summoned and to some extent confided in; but the upshot of it all was that Sir Harry Brewster was sent for on the following day. It is true that by that time Sylvia was rather worse than better, and that excitement had had a prejudicial effect upon her; still it was with a heavy heart and with many misgivings that Muriel received him on his arrival. She did not offer him her hand; she merely

went half way down the stairs to meet him and then, turning round, beckoned to him to follow her. With her hand on the lock of the invalid's door she paused, saying:

"I will leave you alone with Sylvia for five minutes; she is too weak to talk any longer than that."

"Thank you very, very much," answered Sir Harry in a grateful whisper. "I give you my word of honour that I won't outstay my time."

"You will not be allowed to do so," returned Muriel coldly.

But even while the words were upon her lips she was conscious that it was no longer in her power to decide what this man should or should not be allowed to do. He had won the battle, such as it had been; and when he re-appeared—which he did with punctilious exactitude—the light of victory was in his eyes.

"She will recover, Miss Wentworth," he said

confidently, "I am certain of it, and so is she. She says she feels a different being now that——"

"Now that she has seen you?" asked Muriel, half angered, half softened—for indeed the man's face had somehow become transfigured by that brief interview, so that he looked almost boyish, and it was difficult to believe him guilty of anything worse than that selfishness which is the commonest of all human failings and which, unhappily, is so often equivalent in its results to villainy.

"Well—I suppose so," he answered, with a half-laugh. And then: "I'm afraid you will always hate and despise me, Miss Wentworth. What can I say? I ought not to be here; and yet my being here may perhaps have saved Sylvia's life."

"If that is so," returned Muriel gravely and sadly, "we can only be thankful for your

presence; but we cannot be thankful that it is so. When Sylvia is out of danger we shall have to begin thinking about her future and her happiness again, and I suppose we shall feel that we have not done our best for either by allowing you to meet."

Sir Harry had no rejoinder ready; nor in truth would it have been easy to dispute so patent a probability. Of course he came again on the ensuing day; it was no more possible to forbid that than to help rejoicing at the marked improvement which his advent had brought about in Sylvia's health.

"I feel as if I shouldn't much mind dying now," the girl declared; "but I am going to live, because I want to live."

She was in a sort of ecstacy, the cause of which could not but appear pitifully and pathetically inadequate to Muriel, but which nevertheless had to be recognised and dealt

with. How it was to be dealt with was a question which hardly admitted of more than one answer.

"We have yielded," she felt constrained at last to say to her brother. "Rightly or wrongly, we have done what we swore that we would not do, and now we must face the consequences. It is impossible that things can go on like this."

"Why is it impossible?" the head of the family inquired blandly.

"Because everybody in Biarritz will know, and very soon all our friends in London will know, that Sir Harry Brewster has been constantly with Sylvia since her illness. The only way in which we can excuse ourselves is to admit that they are engaged to be married."

"It does not surprise me to hear you say so," remarked Mr. Wentworth, with a resigned air; "you are always in extremes. Personally, I

prefer means—and Brewster, I suspect, has next to none. Not being disposed to support him out of my own—which, as you know, are very modest—I cannot bestow my daughter upon him, even to stop the mouths of the gossips."

"You put your refusal upon the wrong ground," returned Muriel impatiently. "When you say that you cannot bestow your daughter upon Sir Harry Brewster, you mean, I suppose, that you cannot bestow your daughter upon a man who has been divorced from his wife."

"Excuse me: I mean nothing more than what I say. For choice, one might prefer a son-in-law whose history had been a little less eventful; but fathers are seldom permitted to pick and choose. Under all the circumstances, I should be prepared to make the best of Brewster if he had a sufficient income. Since he has not, he will have to go, and we must put our trust in time and in Johnny Hill."

"Sylvia will never marry Johnny Hill," said Muriel, shaking her head.

"I am not so sure of that; still you may possibly be right. What then? The world is full of Johnny Hills, and we shall have to devote our energies to the discovery of another one."

Muriel sighed. It was useless to expect assistance from one who could not or would not believe that human life is anything but light comedy; she said what she had known all along that she would be forced to say, although she had cherished some faint hope of a respite.

"I can't let Sylvia die. In my heart and conscience I believe she will die if we separate her now from the man whom she loves; so, as your only objection is on the score of income, I will supply the income. I will settle two-thirds of what I possess upon her, and then they

will be able to marry and be happy. At least, I hope they will be happy. If it is wrong for people who have been divorced to marry again —and I am afraid it is—then I must bear the blame. I can't let Sylvia die."

Mr. Wentworth clasped his hands behind his head and contemplated her, with a smile, through his half-closed eyelids. "The funny thing," he observed, "is that you really mean it. You would make this insane sacrifice; you know that it would be accepted; and, unless I am greatly mistaken, you also know that it would no sooner be accomplished than you would begin to regret it. Now, do let me warn you, while it is still time, not to play these dangerous pranks with frail mortals. Sylvia and Brewster would take your money as soon as look at you; they would make conventional protests of course; but they would be very much disappointed if you listened to them. As

for me, just consider for a moment what a temptation you are holding out to me. I don't share your scruples with regard to divorce; I don't believe Brewster to be very much worse than his neighbours; I am naturally anxious that your money shall find its way into her pocket, instead of swelling the resources of this Society of S. Francis or of some kindred association. But as I am not wholly devoid of principles, I must ask you to reflect upon what your position will be after you have despoiled yourself. A third of your present income will certainly not suffice to provide you with the comforts to which you have been accustomed, and you will be no richer at my death; for I need scarcely tell you that I have bequeathed everything to my daughter. Look again before you leap."

"I have looked," answered Muriel, "and I have come to the conclusion that the leap must

be taken. It isn't the reasons which you mention that would have made me hesitate, and the true reasons, it seems to me, are over-ruled by sheer necessity. Mr. Compton told me how it would be. I don't know whether he will admit me into the Society of S. Francis now; but if he won't, I shall be able to find some other way of occupying my time, and although I shall not be rich, I shall not be poor. Neither you nor Sylvia must imagine that the loss of money is any loss to me; I have always wished to get rid of it and always intended to do so in one way or another."

Mr. Wentworth shrugged his shoulders. "*Liberavi animam meam*," he remarked; "it is no fault of mine if you refuse to listen to reason. You are a singularly foolish and impetuous person, all the same."

CHAPTER VIII.

WORDSWORTH—at any rate he says so—was often left mourning by the gratitude of men and had only "heard" of "hearts unkind, kind deeds with coldness still returning." One would be sorry to accuse so admirable a person and so admired a poet of consciously writing claptrap; but it will be admitted that his experience must have been somewhat exceptional. The truth doubtless is that we ought not to expect gratitude, that if we look for payment in that coin our kind deeds cannot be called unselfish, and that when we fail to obtain it we are no more deserving of pity than anybody else who

has made a bad bargain. Still, we may as well, all of us, confess at once that we like to be thanked, for this is a fallen world, and we are miserable sinners, and there is no health in us.

Mr. Wentworth proved himself a true prophet with regard to his daughter and Sir Harry Brewster. When Muriel's proposition was first broached to them, they declared with one voice that they could not accept unhoped-for bliss at such a price ; they were quite sure that it would be wrong to do so, and they begged her to say no more about it. But she persisted in saying more, and she made use of arguments which certainly did sound plausible, and in a very short time they grew accustomed to the idea. After all, why should they not take what she did not want and what would otherwise be in all probability bestowed upon less deserving members of the community? It must be assumed that she knew her own mind, and

they could not but feel a sympathetic respect for the wishes of one who knew her own mind.

However, when it was all settled and the engagement was an established fact, they might have been a little more amiable and a little more thankful. If Muriel did not say this to herself the unformulated thought was present with her; and so it came to pass that another portion of her brother's forecast was to some extent verified. She did not regret her generosity, for she knew that, if it could have been recalled, she would have acted in the same way again; but she did deeply regret the necessity for it, and she felt, too, that it had not won her the love of its recipients. She should, of course, have been aware that love is not to be bought, and also that her gift had hardly been conferred with that good grace which alone can render gifts palatable. If she could not look cheerful

about it—and this was beyond her—her reward must be found in the consciousness of having averted a great calamity by the substitution of a minor one.

But, indeed, it was not a matter of certainty that the great calamity had been averted. Sylvia, to be sure, had been tided over a crisis; she was now able to leave her bed, and, the weather having suddenly become warm, she could lie upon a sofa by the open window for several hours every day and enjoy the sunshine; yet her strength did not seem to return, nor would the doctor say more than that there was no longer any reason for immediate anxiety. She was perfectly happy, which was no doubt an important thing; only Muriel saw what neither Mr. Wentworth nor Sir Harry would see, that the high spirits which kept up her vitality during the day were always followed by a physical reaction towards evening, and that

she was not getting the repose which is so essential to convalescence. Her nights, too, were disturbed and restless.

One afternoon when Sir Harry had at last been induced to take his leave, after having sat talking to Sylvia for two hours, Muriel followed him out of the room, and said:

"Do you know what I should like you to do? I should like you to be summoned to England on business and to go away for a week or ten days. At this rate, Sylvia will never get well. I don't think you realise how weak she is, or what harm it does her to over-exert herself."

Sir Harry pulled a long face. "I am willing to do anything that may hasten Sylvia's recovery," he replied, "but I daresay you will forgive me for doubting whether my departure would produce that effect. In any case, I can't go back to England, because, to tell you the honest truth, I am afraid I might have some

disagreeable encounters with the writters if I did. I might go to Paris, of course; still I really don't think I ought, unless Sylvia gives her full consent. My own belief is that she is growing stronger every day; but even if I am mistaken, you will agree with me that it can only do her harm to be distressed. And I have the vanity to feel convinced that my going away would distress her."

Muriel did not attempt to argue the point. For a short time she had almost liked the man and had tried to believe in him; but now she had reverted to her original conviction of his worthlessness, and that incidental admission of his with regard to his debts did not shock her as it might have done a week earlier. She took for sheer impudence what was in truth a manifestation of the candour which was his redeeming virtue, and she let him go without further words.

It remained to try what could be done by

means of an appeal to Sylvia ; but she was not sanguine as to the results of such an appeal, nor was she surprised by its complete failure.

" What do you mean, Muriel ? " asked the girl starting up from her reclining posture as soon as she saw the drift of the suggestion which was delicately conveyed to her. " Why do you want to send Harry away? Do you think you can part us now? Oh, you can't be so cruel and so wicked ! "

" I am not so foolish, at all events," answered Muriel, smiling. " There is no question of your being parted for more than a week or so ; but you yourself must know that you are not advancing as you ought to be, and that his being here for such a long time every day is keeping you back. For the matter of that, he won't go unless you ask him to go ; he has just told me so."

" Then," said Sylvia, sinking back upon her

pillows again, "he will stay. I couldn't ask him to go even if my life depended on it. I shouldn't dare! So long as he is here he is mine, and I have no fears; but if he were to leave me—oh, how can one tell what dreadful things may not happen? Men are not like us; generally it is out of sight out of mind with them, and—and —well, I don't know whether the joy of seeing him and talking to him does me harm; but I know it would do me a thousand times more harm to be continually fretting during his absence."

"Do you trust him so little?" asked Muriel sadly.

"Oh, I don't deny that it is shameful to distrust him; but I am ill, and I can't always drive away the horrid thoughts that come into my mind. Do you remember that day when Colonel Medhurst met Harry and made a scene? I thought at the time that I didn't care

a bit whether what he said was true or not; everybody commits sins, and everybody is supposed to be forgiven if he repents of them. But now, when I am lying awake at night, the thought of that woman haunts me. I say to myself, 'He must have been in love with her once; but he tired of her, and why shouldn't he tire of you?' It isn't as if I had anything to give him except a rather pretty face, and my face won't be pretty for long; it looks quite drawn and ugly even now in the mornings. I don't know why I am speaking to you in this way. Does it disgust you?"

Muriel shook her head, but could make no articulate reply. Her eyes were full of tears and her heart of pity. Alas! the poor child's apprehensions were only too well founded; it was impossible to refute them, yet it would be worse than useless to express concurrence in them. There was nothing for it but to keep

silence, and this was the more easy since she could not trust herself to speak.

But Sylvia, who read her thoughts, began to laugh and said, "There! you needn't look so dismal about it; it is all nonsense. When I am in my sober senses I am as sure of Harry as I am of myself; I only let you into the secret of my nightmares so that you might understand why I can't send him away from me. Besides," she added in a graver voice, "I am not sure that I can afford to lose him even for a day. Yesterday I asked the doctor suddenly whether I should ever be well again, and I saw by his face what he thought, though he pretended to laugh at me. Last night I felt as if I was dying. Antoinette was dozing in her chair, and I was very nearly waking her and sending for you; but the feeling passed off and I fell asleep. Well, if I do die, I daresay I shall have had as much happiness as most people; and perhaps

if I live—but we won't talk any more about it. I am going to bed now; and please, Muriel, don't ask Harry to leave me again, because indeed I couldn't bear it!"

Muriel could but give the required promise. Sir Harry would not go at her bidding, nor did she any longer think it desirable that he should do so. From that moment she lost all hope of her niece's restoration to health.

Many days passed without much apparent change; but she saw that the girl was slowly sinking, and the doctor, while declining to commit himself to any positive opinion, saw it also. "I told you from the first, my dear lady, that she had no stamina," he said.

Only Sir Harry and Mr. Wentworth remained blind; because they were both of them men who possessed the power of ignoring painful possibilities. What Sylvia herself thought it was difficult to tell. After the conversation recorded

above she did not again refer to her condition, and Muriel had not the heart to say anything to her about it. A time must come, and would probably come soon, when all affectation of ignorance would have to be cast aside.

But that dreaded day never came. One evening Muriel had, as usual, left the invalid, who had fallen asleep, and was herself preparing to go to bed, when Antoinette, the French maid, rushed into the room without knocking.

"Venez, Mademoiselle, venez vite!" the woman gasped; "je crois qu'elle est morte!"

Muriel was scarcely frightened at first: Sylvia had had more than one fainting-fit of late, and that her inexperienced attendant should have mistaken unconsciousness for death was not surprising. Antoinette, however, was not mistaken, and when Muriel had hurried to the bedside, the evidence of her own senses soon convinced her that there was no room for doubt or

hope. It was terrible, it was incredible ; but it was true. Without a word of farewell, without, so far as could be known, any presentiment that her end was so near, the girl had passed quietly away in her sleep ; she, her joys and her troubles, had ceased to belong to this world, and never again would she be a source of anxiety to those who loved her.

Well, it was more than probable that, as she herself had said, she had had her share of earthly happiness ; death is not the worst enemy of mankind, nor is life our best friend ; and since we all must die sooner or later, those who die painlessly in their youth should perhaps be esteemed fortunate. But these consolatory reflections are of general rather than of particular application, and Muriel had to pass through a long period of sorrow and self-reproach (though there was little enough occasion for the latter) before she was able to admit them.

CHAPTER IX.

MURIEL, as has been said, had been in some measure prepared for Sylvia's death; she had, at any rate, known there was little or no prospect of ultimate recovery. But upon Sir Harry and upon Mr. Wentworth the blow fell like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, and they were completely stunned by it. Of the two, the former, when he regained possession of his senses, suffered perhaps the most. His love may not have been, and probably was not, worth much; the chances are that it would have burnt itself out in due season, and that he would have treated his second wife no better than he had

treated many other women before her. But naturally he did not take that view of his case, and his self-pity was, to say the least of it, excusable. He had made such excellent resolutions; he had been so fully determined to turn over a new leaf and begin a different kind of life! Now everything was at an end; his dream was one which would have to be put away and forgotten, like other dreams; he had lost—at least he told himself so in his despair—all that rendered existence of any value to him. It would be doing him an injustice to say that he mourned over the loss of the fortune which his bride was to have brought with her as her marriage-portion; yet that loss was a serious fact which stared him in the face when he tried to look forward into the future and to which he could not altogether close his eyes.

His connection with the Wentworth family was perforce terminated. Mr. Wentworth had

only accepted him under protest and because there had seemed to be no help for it; Muriel had always detested him; and, as a matter of fact, both of them begged to be excused from seeing him until after the funeral. He had of course a right to be present at that sad ceremony, and he was present; but as soon as it had been concluded and the earth had been shovelled on to the wreaths which covered poor Sylvia's coffin, he felt that there was nothing to detain him any longer at Biarritz.

"I suppose we shall be strangers henceforth, Miss Wentworth," he said, at the end of the brief farewell interview which Muriel accorded to him; "everything connected with my name must be painful to you, and I don't wonder at it. But, although I dare not thank you in my own name, I may be allowed to say that I shall never forget your goodness and generosity to Sylvia; and I think, after a time, it will be a

comfort to you to remember that you were the means of making her last days happy."

Thus he made a fairly graceful exit, and since he will not appear again in these pages, it may be mentioned here that his subsequent career, so far as it has gone, has not been marked by any scandalous episodes. Apparently he has overcome his financial difficulties; for he is to be seen in London and at Newmarket, and, as he has not ceased to be a first-rate shot, he is invited to many country houses during the winter months, although Morecambe Priory is not one of them. One may surmise that in a heart toughened by varied experiences a soft corner remains sacred to the memory of Sylvia Wentworth, and one may also, by a stretch of charity, go so far as to believe that some of the good resolutions with which Sylvia was instrumental in inspiring its owner have been fulfilled; but men of Sir Harry Brewster's stamp do not

brood over their sorrows: otherwise their faces would not remain smooth while those of so many of their juniors are scored by indelible lines.

As for Mr. Wentworth, his grief, while it lasted, was deep and sincere. It was, of course, selfish, like every other emotion that he experienced. His feeling, if he did not express it in so many words, was that he had been very cruelly treated. He had been a most indulgent parent; he had refused his daughter nothing; he had consented to her marriage with a man of whom he could not approve, upon the understanding that the pecuniary sacrifice which such a marriage must entail was to be borne by somebody else; and this was his reward! His child was taken from him; his sister was sure either to marry or to devote herself and her means to some insane scheme for ameliorating the condition of the lower classes; he saw before him the

prospect of a lonely and objectless old age. It was very, very hard; and Muriel, who should have been sympathising with him and trying to comfort him, would only hold her tongue and look heartbroken.

Muriel looked as she felt, and although she was sorry for her brother, she could not attempt to console him after any fashion which he would be likely to consider appropriate. She knew him well enough to know that in his case time would prove a certain and speedy anodyne, and perhaps this knowledge, combined with her own preoccupation and unhappiness, rendered her somewhat less attentive to his creature comforts than had been her wont. He was by way of being too bowed down by the weight of his affliction to care what food was set before him; but he could not help caring, and when, after Muriel and he had returned to their melancholy home in London, the cook took advantage of

relaxed supervision to send up dinners which were far below the mark in point of refinement, he assumed the air of an uncomplaining martyr.

It was indeed a melancholy home that these two bereaved persons were doomed to inhabit. They had little to say to one another ; they only met at meal times ; visitors were not admitted, and at first Mr. Wentworth doubted whether he ought to go to his club. At the expiration of a week he granted himself that trifling concession, feeling that flesh and blood could no longer endure a system of solitary confinement ; but Muriel sat all day long in the silent drawing-room, where a hundred trifles kept reminding her of her loss, and had not the heart to go out of doors. She would not even seek out Mr. Compton, much though she longed to confide all her sorrows to him. She knew instinctively that he would understand her, that he would not be hard

upon her in this hour of her despair, that he would condone the weakness which he had predicted and from which, after all, no evil consequences had resulted ; yet she could not summon up courage to take the risk of a rebuff. He must have heard the news of Sylvia's death ; in all probability he had heard of her previous betrothal to Sir Harry Brewster ; if, then, he felt any pity for one whose intentions at least had been good and upon whom a heavy visitation had fallen, he would surely find time to call at Upper Brook Street. In fact, she so fully expected him to call that she gave instructions for his admission in the event of his presenting himself.

As, however, he failed to put in an appearance, she was forced to the conclusion that he felt no pity for her. Well, he had never shown himself very compassionate ; perhaps, clever though he was, he could not quite enter into a woman's

feelings. It had been clever of him to lay his finger upon the weak spot in her character ; yet he might have divined that there is a species of strength belonging to that particular species of weakness, and that, just because she could not bear to see others unhappy, she was capable of devoting herself heart and soul to such a work as he had in hand. Being thus defrauded of sympathy from a quarter to which she had looked for it with more confidence than she had been aware of, her thoughts not unnaturally turned towards one who had once told her that she was essential to his happiness, and had furthermore implored her to let him know if at any time he could be of service to her. Her occupations and her troubles had not caused her to forget Colonel Medhurst ; she had often thought of him, she had often accused herself of having behaved badly to him, she had more than once longed for the sight of his honest face and the sound of his voice

and certainly it was in his power to render her a service now at no greater expense of time and convenience than might be implied in finding his way to her house. But such favours cannot be asked for; they ought to suggest themselves to persons of ordinary intelligence. Moreover, it had to be borne in mind that Colonel Medhurst was not the man to look leniently upon such a surrender as that to which she had been driven. Sylvia was dead; but Sylvia, if she had lived, would have become the bride of the villain who had wrecked his sister's life, and he might not unreasonably hold Muriel answerable for an abomination which had only been averted in that tragic way. Upon the whole, the chances seemed to be that his friendship, like that of Mr. Compton, had been fruitlessly sacrificed.

He cleared himself in some measure of that unmerited suspicion by a letter, written from

Colchester, which was delivered to Miss Wentworth one morning, and which was not much more infelicitously worded than letters of condolence usually are. What disappointed and vexed Muriel was that it was a letter of condolence, pure and simple. Anybody and everybody, writing to her at such a time, must have made use of commonplaces which he appeared to consider adequate. He would have set them down on paper earlier, he said, but he had shrunk from intruding upon her and had also been kept busy by troubles of his own, which, although not to be compared with hers in magnitude, had left him little leisure for correspondence. He was sure, however, that she would not attribute his silence to indifference —and so forth.

It was easy enough to read between the lines and to guess at the nature of the troubles alluded to. His sister, no doubt, had been horrified by

the intelligence that the man who had once been her husband was about to contract a second matrimonial alliance ; she would have said some hard things about the Wentworth family, which Colonel Medhurst was in no position to contradict. Nay, he must have shared her indignation and disgust ; for how was he to know anything about the cruel dilemma in which the Wentworth family had been placed? He might, to be sure, have been wise enough and charitable enough to understand that one member of that family would not have given way without reasons of overwhelming cogency for so doing ; but, when all is said and done, wisdom and charity are no such every-day qualities, and since Muriel did not intend to marry Colonel Medhurst, it was perhaps a matter for congratulation that he had been thus summarily and effectually cured of a vain attachment.

That he had been cured was quite evident.

She read his letter through again from beginning to end and was more than ever struck by its cold and constrained tone. No lover could possibly have written so formally, nor could he have felt any doubt as to the sense in which his composition would be interpreted. Indeed, he had evidently been at some pains to make his meaning unmistakable. "You are not what I took you for," he seemed to say. "Of course, under the circumstances of your bereavement, I cannot openly upbraid you; but I wish you to know that you have lost both my love and my esteem."

Now there are very few women in the world, or men either, who can endure to have that kind of thing said to them. Most of us, knowing full well that we deserve all the love and esteem we are ever likely to get, would be made exceedingly angry by such a statement; but Muriel, who was in a deplorably low condition of mind, was only

moved to tears by the thought that her best friend had turned his back upon her. She did not blame him; his conduct was—at all events ostensibly—justified by hers, and perhaps, if no allowances were to be made, she might be said to have fairly forfeited the friendship which he had been so kind as to offer her. But she pitied herself very much, and she realised for the first time what a heavy penalty was implied in the payment of that forfeit. She had always been lonely. Now she was absolutely and utterly alone: nothing remained to her, save the intermittent companionship of James and the pleasing duty of ordering James's dinner for him every day.

But who can tell when the turning in the long lane of misfortune has been reached? Muriel had begun to devote her attention once more to cookery-books — since that appeared to be her sole mission in life—when one evening,

not long after this, Mr. Wentworth entered the drawing-room with a smile of suppressed amusement upon his lips which seemed designed to provoke inquiry. It produced that effect after a minute or two and elicited a prompt reply.

"You want to know what I am laughing at?" said he. "Well, I will tell you; because it is really funny, and I hope it will make you laugh too, though I notice that you have rather lost the trick of laughter lately."

"Neither you nor I have much reason to feel merry," observed Muriel, with a shade of reproach in her voice.

"My dear girl, sorrows are sorrows and jokes are jokes. We are so constituted that both appeal to our sensibilities, and why should we pretend that we can't laugh through our tears, when the phenomenon is one of daily occurrence? Permit me to indulge in my humble little joke

and don't be so foolish as to accuse yourself of heartlessness if it tickles you. What should you think of me in the character of a blushing bridegroom, for instance?"

If this was a joke, it was not a very successful one. Muriel had never lost sight of the possibility that her brother might marry again; but that he should contemplate such a step just now amazed her and, to tell the truth, shocked her into the bargain. She said something more or less appropriate, and gravely inquired the name of her future sister-in-law.

"Ah," answered Mr. Wentworth, leaning back in his chair and nursing his leg, "this is where the comic part of the business comes in. I would like to make you guess; but you look so forbidding that perhaps I had better hurry the point and secure my reward of cheers and laughter without more delay. The name of the lovely and accomplished being who

has deigned to bestow herself upon me is—Mrs. Hill."

Muriel was so taken aback that she could only stare incredulously. Her first impression was that her brother was amusing himself by talking nonsense; but on scrutinizing him more closely, she thought she could detect a certain shame-facedness beneath his assumption of jocularity. "I don't know what to say, James," was all the reply that she could make after a prolonged pause. "You have always cited Mrs. Hill as an example of everything that is vulgar and ridiculous; but I suppose that you must be serious and that you are telling me the truth."

"I am certainly telling you the truth," answered Mr. Wentworth; "as for my being serious you will perceive that the subject is not one which lends itself very readily to serious treatment. Mrs. Hill is, of course, ridiculous

and she may also be vulgar, although I do not remember calling her so; but she is good-natured, she has plenty of money, and I am convinced that she will take the greatest care of me. Moreover she will provide me with constant diversion. Far be it from me to utter a word of complaint against you, my dear Muriel; but you must acknowledge that home has not been made particularly diverting for me of late. And I really cannot live without diversion in some form or other."

It was impossible to feel very angry with one who was so candidly selfish. "You have a right to please yourself, James," began Muriel hesitatingly, "and now there is no need for you to consider anyone except yourself. But — but Mrs. Hill of all people!"

"Oh, she is rather old and rather fat, and she lies open to hostile criticism in a great many respects. She possesses, however, the solid

merits which I have enumerated. I understand the significance of the reproof which you convey so delicately when you tell me that I am not now called upon to consider anyone except myself; but in all sincerity, don't you think I have as much consideration for you as you have for me? I am not asking you to live in the house with Mrs. Hill; I know you wouldn't do such a thing; but then I also know that you wouldn't live much longer in a house with me. Nothing seems to me more certain than that you will either marry or join some eccentric society before the year is out. Now isn't it a fact that your eyes have already begun to turn longingly towards your friend Compton?"

The retort was fair enough. There are more ways than one of displaying selfishness, and Muriel could not but acknowledge to herself that if Mr. Compton had offered, at any time

since her return home, to receive her into the Society of S. Francis, she would have been sorely tempted to abandon her brother to his fate. She did not answer his question but somewhat hastily disclaimed any intention of reproving him ; and so, after a few more words, the conversation ended.

Later in the evening she was able to derive some comfort from the thought that she was at all events emancipated by this change in her prospects. Mr. Compton might continue to disbelieve in her vocation ; but he could no longer represent to her that her duties began and ended at home. She was about to be deprived of her home ; she would have to provide herself with a fresh one ; she was not sufficiently advanced in age to live alone, and surely she was entitled, if ever any woman was, to claim the refuge afforded by the association of which he was the head. Since he did not choose to

come to her, she would go to him; she would lay her case before him, begging him to disregard all preconceived notions that he might have formed respecting her and to treat her as what she was—an individual without family ties and with a certain amount of money which she was anxious to expend in furthering the objects that he advocated. In common justice and consistency he could scarcely dismiss her. Being thus firmly resolved as to her course, she went to bed in comparatively good spirits and slept more soundly than she had done for a long time past.

CHAPTER X.

ONE goes to bed in one frame of mind and one wakes up in another. This is a matter of universal experience which has its conspicuous advantages as well as its drawbacks, although there is certainly something rather humbling to human pride in being thus at the mercy of physical conditions. When Muriel Wentworth awoke, her first thoughts naturally turned to the disclosure which had been made to her on the previous evening, and she found that she could not let them dwell upon her future sister-in-law without feelings of shame and disgust. James was going to disgrace himself; no other term

than disgrace would fit such an alliance prompted by such motives ; and she felt that the egotistic light in which she had viewed his project had led her to acquiesce in it far too readily. Remonstrances might not, it was true, have been of much avail ; still she ought at least to have tried the effect of them ; perhaps also she was to some extent responsible for his decision in favour of desperate remedies. Undoubtedly she had paid very little attention to his comfort of late, still less had she attempted to divert him ; and, as he himself had pathetically avowed, he was a man who could not exist without diversion. Well, it was not yet too late to amend ; she would apologise for her past shortcomings, she would endeavour to do better for the future, and she would promise him that, if he would abandon an idea which was really preposterous, his home should henceforth be made more cheerful for him.

Animated by these excellent sentiments, she went downstairs to breakfast, and her exposition of them had at any rate the effect of procuring Mr. Wentworth some immediate diversion.

"If I understand you rightly," said he, when she had finished, "you suggest nothing less heinous than that I should jilt the confiding creature who is at this moment under the impression that she is my affianced bride. You mean well, I am sure; but I must own that I am surprised at your heartlessness."

"Won't you speak seriously just for a few minutes, James?" pleaded Muriel. "Mrs. Hill may have been very silly to accept your offer——"

"Thank you, my dear," interjected Mr. Wentworth, with a little bow.

"But she can't be so silly as to mind much if you tell her that you have thought better of it.

Of course she knows what prompted you to make it—I daresay you didn't disguise your motives—and she must see that it is for her own happiness, as well as yours, that she should release you. Besides, she has a grown-up son to think of."

"Liberal pecuniary arrangements will be made on Johnny's behalf," answered Mr. Wentworth composedly. "He is already amply provided for, and on his mother's death he will inherit very nearly as much as he would have inherited if she had remained in a condition of forlorn widowhood. We fully considered the case of Johnny; for I assure you we are most considerate people. We considered your case too; and Arabella—have I mentioned before that Mrs. Hill's Christian name is Arabella?—quite agreed with me that we should be doing you a positive service by leaving you free to follow your own devices. As I told you yester-

day, my dear Muriel, I am acquainted with your devices; I don't pretend to know which of them will finally commend itself to you; but I will make so bold as to predict that before sunset you will have interviewed the Father Superior of the Society of S. Francis and submitted a tempting proposition to him."

"Whether I do or not will depend entirely upon you," Muriel declared. "I don't deny —why should I?—that I think of asking Mr. Compton to provide me with a home and an occupation; but you can give me a very good reason for not doing so if you like."

"I could give you half-a-dozen good reasons for not doing so; only you know as well as I do that you wouldn't listen to them. As for the special reason to which you allude; I must beg you to excuse me. My mind is made up, my word has been pledged; and, in addition to that, I really shouldn't feel justified in afflicting you

with the scruples of conscience which would inevitably assail you hereafter. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that the Society of S. Francis would in process of time lose the attractions which it has for you at present, there would still remain the possibility of your meeting somebody worthy to be your husband, and then the recollection that you had deprived me of a snug haven for my old age might deter you from marrying that worthy man. In such an event I should be quite inconsolable."

Mr. Wentworth spoke, as usual, in ironical accents ; but there was a good deal of common sense in what he said. If he was to resign Mrs. Hill's companionship, as well as her money, at his sister's bidding, Muriel, on her side, could evidently do no less than give up her life to him, and she was not unnaturally staggered for a moment when this obligation was made manifest to her.

"You see now," he remarked smilingly, "that I am like the donkey in the fable and that, since I am bent upon jumping over the precipice, you will only fatigue yourself unnecessarily by hanging on to my tail. Allow me to take my leap, and I will allow you to take yours. We are both of us donkeys, no doubt; but we are so simple and innocent that Providence may perhaps interfere on our behalf and protect us from broken bones. Now go and see Mr. Compton."

Muriel went without much further ado. She, at any rate, could not restrain her brother from taking his proposed leap, and it might be hoped that Mr. Compton would be equally unsuccessful in her own case. It was with a beating heart that she sought admittance into the familiar building wherein she hoped ere long to take up her permanent abode, and she paced restlessly up and down the waiting-room until the arbiter

of her destinies, who, fortunately, was at home, made his appearance.

"Mahomet has had to come to the mountain, you see," she said rather tremulously, as she took his outstretched hand. "I thought you would have found your way to Upper Brook Street; why didn't you? Was it because you felt that you couldn't speak to me without condemning me, and because you thought it would be cruel to add to my sorrow? But don't you understand that remaining away was just as bad? It is better to be rebuked than to be contemptuously left alone. Besides — who knows?—I might have had a word or two to say in self-defence."

"I don't know what you mean," he replied; "what have I to rebuke you for? I heard of your great trouble, and if I had had the slightest idea that you were in London, I would of course have gone to you upon the chance of your con-

senting to receive me; but I supposed that you were still abroad."

Muriel drew a breath of relief. "Well, I am glad," she said; "though perhaps it is rather too soon to be glad. You know nothing at all then?—you don't know that before my poor Sylvia died she was engaged to be married to Sir Harry Brewster, with her father's consent and mine? You don't know that it was all my doing? Because at last the question came to be one of money, and I gave in and undertook to provide the money—just as you said I should."

He shook his head. "There was a rumour of the engagement; some lady or other mentioned it to me but she gave no particulars, and I could not tell whether her information was accurate or not." He added, after a moment, "It is very sad for you; still I suppose that the poor girl's last days were made happier for her through you, and it must be some consolation to you to re-

member that. Probably it was because you saw her health giving way that you acted as you did."

"Yes, indeed it was that and nothing else," answered Muriel eagerly. "How did you guess?—but you guess everything! I don't really believe that I should have yielded if she had been strong and well; but she was dying before my eyes, and the doctor said she must be relieved from mental distress, and Sir Harry Brewster, who had followed us abroad, was in the place. We could not refuse to let them meet, and when once that concession had been made, the rest followed almost of necessity. James was ready to consent to the engagement if only the money difficulty could be overcome; and so the responsibility fell upon me. I suppose I was wrong; but I should do it again. It was to save her life—and, after all, it did not save her life!"

At this point Muriel's self-control suddenly deserted her and she began to cry. She was furious with herself for being so silly, which naturally made her cry all the more; but indeed her emotion did not injure her in the esteem of the experienced practitioner with whom she had to do. Compton was unlike the generality of men, who are frightened or irritated by a woman's tears; in the course of his daily work he had to witness many similar manifestations of sensibility, and he knew exactly how to deal with them. He knew so well how to deal with Miss Wentworth that in a very few minutes she had choked down her sobs and was smiling upon him gratefully. She had never realised before how kind and gentle he could be; she had never supposed him capable of entering into all her feelings as he did. He did not affect to think that she had been right in promoting a marriage which, according to his ideas and hers,

would have been no marriage ; but he admitted without hesitation that if he had been in her place he would probably have behaved as she had done.

"I have never been exposed to so strong a temptation in my life," said he ; "but I have been exposed to many less strong, and I have yielded to them. So you see that I am in no position to condemn you. Well, it has been in vain ; and now you don't know what to do with your life and your money. Isn't that what you came here to say ? "

"I came here to offer them to you," answered Muriel. "Are you going to drive me away a second time ? "

And as Compton smiled and drummed upon the table with a dubious air, she went on ; "you can't urge what you urged before ; Sylvia is gone, and my brother is going to marry again ; he told me about it this morning. Very soon I

shall be as completely alone in the world as it is possible to be, and if you repudiate me now, your only reason must be that you distrust me personally."

She spoke with some vehemence, feeling that her position was a strong one; and that much Compton freely admitted, after he had asked a question or two with reference to the betrothal of Mr. Wentworth and Mrs. Hill.

"I have perhaps no right to go on throwing cold water upon you," he said at length, "and it is very true that you are no longer situated as you were when you first applied to me. Nevertheless, I won't disguise from you that I have misgivings. It would be useless, and possibly also unkind, to tell you what some of them are; but I will repeat one which I mentioned to you at the outset. I don't like enlisting heiresses in our service. If you were twenty years older, or

if you could dispose of the bulk of your fortune before joining us, my difficulty would be a good deal lessened."

"I can't make myself twenty years older," answered Muriel; "but as for disposing of my money, that is a very simple affair; one can always get rid of money. Only I don't quite understand why you should wish me to do so. James has plenty and Mrs. Hill has more than plenty; so that it would be absurd to offer it to them. Consequently, if you won't take it, it will have to be distributed amongst hospitals and other charitable institutions. Surely the Society of S. Francis has as good a claim as another?"

"No doubt; but the Society of S. Francis will not benefit by laying itself open to charges of greed and undue influence and so forth. However, I am aware that these objections will scarcely hold water, and the objections which

might hold water are—well, I don't quite see my way to insisting upon them. You shall take at least another week for consideration, though. I will ask you, during that time, to peruse our rules carefully and to think over each of them. You will see that they are in many respects very stringent, that they call upon you to make a complete sacrifice of your individual will, and that when once you have given up your allegiance, you will practically have cut yourself off from all possibility of retreat. For example, we cannot, and we must not, restore any sum of money which may have been legally transferred to us, and every member of the Society is required to place his or her worldly goods in the common fund. We do not permit experiments, you see."

"Of course I know that," answered Muriel. "I will wait another week or another month, if you wish it; but you may be perfectly certain

that neither weeks nor months nor years would make me change my mind. When you know me a little better you will acknowledge, I hope, that I am not a very changeable person."

Mr. Compton laughed a little, but abstained from any rejoinder. Presently he remarked, after consulting his watch, that his time was up.

"If," he added, as he escorted his visitor down to the corridor, "you should wish to see me again before you take the final step, and if you should think that I could help you in any way, you will send for me, I hope."

"Yes," she answered, "I will; but I don't know that there is much more to be said. You have taken an immense load off my mind, and I am very grateful to you."

Then, while he was in the act of taking leave of her, she summoned up courage to make a request which she had been wanting to make for a quarter of an hour past. "Colonel Medhurst is

a friend of yours, is he not?" she asked, with a slightly heightened colour.

"Well, yes; I daresay I may venture to call him so, though we seldom meet now-a-days."

"He is a friend of mine too," Muriel went on somewhat hurriedly. "At least he was a friend of mine, and—and I like him very much, and I don't wish him to think worse of me than he can help. I am afraid that he has been hurt and displeased by what he has heard about our poor Sylvia's engagement to Sir Harry Brewster—of course it is only natural that he should be—and, if it were possible, I should like him to know how and why it was that we gave our consent. Perhaps you might have an opportunity of telling him."

Compton fixed those piercing eyes of his for an instant upon her, but immediately lowered them again. "Would not your best plan be to write to Medhurst?" he suggested.

"I shall write to him, because he wrote to me the other day; but I don't think I can very well say what I should like to say. *Qui s'excuse s'accuse*, and he wrote quite kindly, without alluding to the subject that he was evidently thinking of. Only his letter was cold, and I could see that he meant it to be cold."

Compton opened his lips, as if he were going to say something, and then apparently thought better of it. "I think I understand," he replied, "and I will take care that Medhurst shall know the truth. You are probably mistaken in imagining that he is displeased with you; still the point is one which can be easily settled. For my own part, I should fancy him a man who is remarkably steadfast in his friendships."

Muriel expressed her thanks and went away with a light heart. Mr. Compton, she felt sure, would represent matters in such a light that Colonel Medhurst would be able to remember

her without bitterness. To all intents and purposes she was about to die, and doubtless he and others who had known her would forget her as speedily as the dead are always forgotten ; yet it is natural and human to desire that, on bidding farewell to the world, one should leave no enemies nor any disenchanted friends behind.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT can be said to an old woman who proposes to make an old fool of herself? The obvious answer is nothing, and silence, no doubt, is as appropriate to such a case as it is to a hundred others—the only misfortune being that it is seldom possible for us to keep silence under circumstances which render silence desirable. It was, for instance, absolutely necessary that Muriel should say something to Mrs. Hill, and the mere fact that she could not think what to say did not relieve her of the obligation. Shortly after her interview with Mr. Compton, therefore, she set forth to call upon the bride-elect, hoping

against hope that some happy inspiration might come to her in the hour of need.

She was so far fortunate as to obtain a respite, for Mrs. Hill was not at home; but just as she was turning to leave the house, she almost ran against Mrs. Hill's only son, who, with heavy clouds upon his brow and a latch-key in his hand, was ascending the steps.

"Oh, is that you, Miss Wentworth?" said Johnny, taking off his hat. "I was thinking of looking you up, only I was told that I shouldn't be admitted if I did. Won't you come in for a few minutes? My mother won't be back much before dinner-time, I expect."

"But that is why I am going away," answered Muriel smiling. "I came here to see your mother."

"Oh, yes, I know," returned Johnny gloomily; "you had to come; but you didn't want to see her—of course you didn't. And I'll tell you

another thing; she doesn't want to see you. She is in a mortal funk of you, as well she may be! Now I do want to see you very badly, and it would be awfully kind of you if you would spare me a quarter of an hour. You're the only person in the world whom I can speak to about —about things that have made me uncommonly miserable."

He really looked miserable, and his artless appeal was hard to resist; so Muriel allowed him to conduct her into the house, although she did not see how she was to relieve his distress unless it might be by reminding him that his mother's marriage would probably be the means of insuring him a rather larger share of liberty than he had hitherto enjoyed. Indeed, his case did not strike her as being a particularly deplorable one, except in so far as every man must deplore an act of folly on his mother's part.

But it was not of his mother or her folly that Jonnny began to speak when he had led the way into the gaudily-furnished drawing-room which was the pride of Mrs. Hill's eyes. His recognition of Muriel as one upon whose sympathy he might rely was based, apparently, on other grounds; and in truth his grief at the cruel blow which she and he had sustained was expressed so simply and unaffectedly that she felt for the first time how unjust had been the good-natured contempt with which she had hitherto regarded the poor fellow.

"I know she didn't care a straw for me," he said; "I don't suppose she ever would have cared. Still, while there's life there's hope, and what I used to say to myself was that sooner or later she was bound to find Brewster out, because, you know, Brewster *is* a bad lot. His best friends—and somehow or other he seems to

have kept plenty of friends—don't attempt to deny that."

"If she had found him out, it would have been too late," answered Muriel. "I think as you do that she must have found him out in the long run; but I am thankful now that she was not robbed of her illusion. And I am sure too, that you would not have wished her to be undeceived before she died. You can't have disliked or feared Sir Harry more than I did; yet I could see nothing for it but to make the best of him."

"Oh, I know how you must have felt about it," said Johnny, with a sigh; "I expect I should have done just what you did. Only I should always have hoped that the engagement might be broken off. I suppose she was awfully fond of him, wasn't she?"

"Yes, it was an infatuation; I doubt whether anything would have cured it. It is possible,

though I doubt if it is at all likely, that he might have done something which would have led her to break off the engagement, and it is also possible that she might then have consented to marry you out of anger and disappointment. But no man should wish to be accepted upon such terms."

Muriel believed this cruel candour to be the best remedy that she had it in her power to employ; besides which her statement had the merit of being true. But perhaps she somewhat under-estimated the strength of calf-love.

"I daresay you are right," Johnny replied; "but there are lots of things that one oughtn't to wish for and does wish for. All I know is that I would have married Sylvia upon any terms. Well, it's all over now, and she'll never know how much I loved her. And I don't believe anybody cares, except you and I."

"Perhaps nobody else cares quite as much," agreed Muriel. "I didn't know that you——" She paused for a moment and then, perceiving that he must guess how she had intended to end her sentence, went on: "To tell you the truth, I always imagined that it was rather your mother's wish than yours that a match should be arranged between you and Sylvia."

Johnny nodded gravely. "So it was first," he acknowledged, "and I shouldn't wonder if that was what knocked any little chance that I might ever have had upon the head. My mother, you see, has taken up the idea that I am a prize, and that nine girls out of ten would only be too delighted if I were to propose to them. Of course that's all bosh, and her behaving as if I had nothing to do but to throw the handkerchief has often made me look like a bigger fool than I am, which is saying something. All the same, it's a fact that lots of

girls would marry a drivelling idiot if he had a few thousands a year of his own, and my mother knows that. My mother," added Johnny, with comical solemnity, "is a woman of the world, and an uncommonly shrewd woman too."

Muriel managed to abstain from laughing; but it was physically impossible to prevent her eyebrows from raising themselves and the corners of her mouth from dropping slightly.

"Ah," observed Johnny, noticing these signs of dissent, "you think she hasn't shown much shrewdness or knowledge of the world by her last move; but, mind you, I'm not so sure of that. Mr. Wentworth, you see, knows a heap of people whom she doesn't know and would like to know. When she is married to him she will have mounted a step or two on the ladder. That's my opinion; and I know it's hers, because she told me so."

"Then all I can say is that I think she ought

to have been ashamed to tell you so," rejoined Muriel warmly.

"That's another matter. For my own part, I must confess that I shouldn't have thought the game was worth the candle; but she was not bound to consult me, and she didn't. I have nothing to complain of, except that it's rather a bore to be cast adrift. Because I don't quite see the fun of living in the house with a step-father."

"It is no great hardship to be one's own master," remarked Muriel.

"Well, that depends; some fellows are accustomed to taking care of themselves, and others aren't. I'm sure I don't know what's going to become of me, and I don't particularly care either. I think I shall go out to Colorado or some such place and start a ranch; anything would be better than hanging on here without a solitary object to live for."

Muriel thought he was a good deal more likely to marry and settle down as a staid paterfamilias; but she was not so unkind as to put her thoughts into words. She confined herself to observing that it is, after all, less embarrassing for a man to be cast adrift than for a woman.

"Oh, you don't propose to live with them then?" said Johnny,

"I haven't been invited to do so; but if I had, I should have declined the invitation. For a long time past I have wished to join a religious order called the Society of S. Francis, of which you may have heard me speak, and now there will be nothing to prevent me from doing as I wish. So long as James required me to keep house for him, I felt doubtful about leaving home; so that in one sense his marriage may be called an advantage for me."

"H'm! I shouldn't call it exactly that; but

I suppose you know best," observed Johnny, to whom it appeared that Miss Wentworth was being driven to make a sad surrender of the destiny marked out by Providence for handsome young women.

Perhaps it was a half-conscious association of ideas that prompted him to say, after a long interval of silence, during which his companion's attention had wandered far away from him:

"Of course you've heard about Colonel Medhurst."

"No; I have heard nothing," answered Muriel, with re-awakened interest. "Is he going to be married?"

Johnny broke into a short laugh. "Not that I'm aware of; *everybody* isn't going to be married. No, poor beggar! he's had worse luck than that—lost all his money. It seems that he invested everything in a coffee plantation in

Ceylon, and now the whole thing has gone to smash and his agent has bolted. It's hard lines upon a man of Medhurst's age to get such a facer, and the worst of it is that he'll have to resign the command of his regiment, they say, because he can't very well live upon his pay in an expensive corps like that. It's just one of those cases that make a useless beggar like me, who has more coin than he knows what to do with, wish it wasn't out of the question to hand over a few thousands to a friend."

"Oh, but Colonel Medhurst is hardly a friend of yours," said Muriel, with an odd feeling of jealousy at the expression of this generous wish.

"Well, it wouldn't make any difference if he were; the only way in which one can give a friend money is by leaving him a legacy and dropping down dead."

Muriel wondered whether that was, after all, a perfectly accurate statement of facts. Certainly

a gift of money cannot be offered to anyone except an indigent relative; but is death so absolutely essential to the payment of a legacy? Take the case of a lady who is about to cut herself off from the world and who, before doing so, must dispose of her fortune—a lady moreover, whose fortune is held to be a positive drawback by those to whom she contemplates affiliating herself; surely a will made by her previous to her retirement would be much the same thing as a will made by a dying person, and those who might benefit under it would not need to feel any scruples of conscience. The more she thought about it the more determined she became to carry out the idea which had occurred to her, and it was little that she heard of Johnny Hill's conversation during the remainder of her visit.

As she walked away, her mind was full of the unmerited misfortunes which had fallen upon

this brave soldier and worthy gentleman. The wreck of his sister's life had, she knew, been a sore trial to him; he had been disappointed—for one must assume that it had been rather a disappointment—in the woman whom he had loved; and now, at a time of life when fresh departures are no longer possible, he was reduced to poverty and was in danger of being forced to abandon his profession. Well, if she could in some measure atone for the share which she had had in causing his troubles, if she could set him upon his legs again before she finally took leave of him, she would be able at least to look back upon one good deed in the course of an otherwise unsatisfactory career. The only awkward circumstance was that it would be necessary to obtain his consent, which was not likely to be accorded without hesitation; for although she would soon be as good as dead, these things have to be explained

before they become evident to the ordinary mind, and it would be scarcely safe to execute a transfer in Colonel Medhurst's favour without saying a word to him about it. At length, therefore, she decided to write and request that he would be so kind as to call upon her when he should next be in London. She would then reason with him and, she hoped, persuade him that he would be doing nobody the slightest wrong by accepting what she must in any case resign. She abstained from giving any hint of her intentions in her letter; she merely said that she was very anxious to see him and that she trusted that her wish might soon be gratified. "Because I hardly know how much longer I shall be here. My brother is going to be married to Mrs. Hill, whom I think you have met in this house, and his marriage will mean the breaking up of our present establishment."

Colonel Medhurst replied with military promptitude. He could quite easily run up to London for a day, he wrote, and he would make a point of doing so. He hoped to be with her soon after three o'clock on the following afternoon, and unless he received a telegram to the contrary, he should take it for granted that the hour would be convenient to her. He was sorry to hear that she was to be put to the trouble of making a fresh home for herself, although, under the circumstances, that was doubtless unavoidable.

Muriel was not a little daunted by the formality of this missive. Obviously he still harboured feelings of resentment against her, and it would be no easy matter to get him to accept a pecuniary gift from one whom there was only too much reason to fear that he despised. Still the attempt must be made, and perhaps he might think a little better of her

when he should have heard what she had to say for herself. It was just possible, too, that Mr. Compton might already have communicated with him.

Meanwhile, she had to make a part of her plans known to her brother, who received the intelligence with a shrug of his shoulders and with the remark that it did not come upon him as a startling surprise.

"I don't think you wise," he said, "but then you don't think me wise; so it's even. If people are not always the best judges of their own affairs, they always think they are—which frees their friends from the painful and useless task of opposing them. I congratulate the Reverend Superior of the Order of S. What's-his-name, who has secured a big fish without any unseemly exertions. When do you propose to take the veil, if I may ask?"

"I thought of waiting until after your mar-

riage ; as soon as that is over I should like to begin my new life. But please do not talk as if I were going to enter a convent, James. There is nothing conventual about the Society of S. Francis, except that we take vows of poverty and obedience, and I shall be able to see you from time to time if you wish it."

"We shall always be charmed to welcome you," replied Mr. Wentworth, "and we shall not detain you very long from taking your vows, whatever they may be ; for our wedding is to take place in about a month's time. You see, we are so young and romantic that we really cannot brook any unnecessary delay."

CHAPTER XII.

It was not without considerable trepidation that Muriel entered the drawing-room at the appointed hour and sat down to await Colonel Medhurst's arrival; for now that the time had come for her to put her proposition into plain words, she could not help perceiving how utterly at variance it was with all conventional notions of propriety. As, however, her imagination had enabled her to foretell pretty clearly what Colonel Medhurst would say, she had the requisite rejoinders quite ready for him; moreover, since she knew what was coming, while he did not, she thought it would not be difficult to

lead up to her point after a fashion which should land her in the stronger position at the decisive moment.

Exactly as the clock struck half-past three he was announced, and although he held himself erect and stepped forward with a smile upon his lips, she could not but feel a sudden shock of surprise and pity when she noticed how greatly his appearance had altered since their last meeting. He had become thin and gaunt; the lines upon his brow and cheeks had deepened, and about his temples some grey hairs which had not been there before were distinctly visible. Thus it was that the conversation was not opened in precise accordance with the programme which she had mentally drawn up; for, instead of greeting him with kindly but distant civility, she exclaimed involuntarily, "How ill you look!"

"Do I?" he answered, "I can't account for

that except by advancing years and rather more than my fair share of worries. I am one of those fortunate people who are never out of health."

"I know you have had many worries of late," said Muriel, recovering herself and reverting to the line of attack upon which she had originally decided, "and I am afraid you consider me answerable for some of them. That was one of my reasons for begging you to come and see me: there are things which can be explained so much more easily by word of mouth than by letter. Of course I know that you would have come without waiting to be asked if you had not been offended with me, and of course you could not help being offended and—and disgusted when you heard of our poor Sylvia's engagement to Sir Harry Brewster; still I do hope that after I have told you what the circumstances were—"

"I assure you," broke in Medhurst eagerly, "that that was not my reason for remaining away; I had other reasons, which I would rather not mention unless you insist upon it; but I don't think they were very good ones. I can't tell you how sorry I am that you should have thought me unjust enough to be offended with you for permitting what you could not prevent. I guessed at once what the true state of the case must be, and there was no occasion for Compton's letter, though I am grateful to you for having asked him to write to me."

"I asked him to say a few words to you when he had an opportunity," answered Muriel; "I did not know that he would write at once. What did he tell you?"

Not, apparently, that Miss Wentworth was a candidate for admission into the society of S. Francis; for had he done so, Colonel Medhurst would doubtless have made some allusion to that

fact. As it was, he looked slightly embarrassed and hesitated for a second or two before replying that Compton's letter had been rather a long one.

"He wrote to me partly about my own affairs, which have been giving me some trouble and anxiety during the last few weeks, and then he mentioned having seen you. He gave me to understand that you were afraid of my having done you the injustice that you spoke about just now and that you wished me to know what had induced you to consent to an engagement which you could not have liked. But, as I told you, it was quite unnecessary to offer me explanations. I should have had no right to blame you in any event, and most certainly I never dreamt of blaming you. I should have been worse than stupid if I had imagined that you gave way to anything short of sheer necessity."

"It is a great relief to me to hear you say so,"

Muriel declared; "I don't think there are many men who would say so in your place. It did seem to me to be a matter of sheer necessity that I should do anything I possibly could to prolong Sylvia's life; but I didn't expect you to think so; I only hoped that, if you knew the truth, you would make some allowance for me."

Medhurst repeated what he had said before and spoke kindly of the unfortunate girl whom in his heart he esteemed fortunate, inasmuch as death had preserved her from becoming the wife of so hopeless a rascal as Sir Harry Brewster. He was very friendly and sympathetic; yet it was evident that he was not altogether at his ease, and Muriel wondered why. It was only when she introduced the subject of her brother's approaching marriage that he pricked up his ears and began to look more like himself.

"And what will you do now?" he asked quickly. "I gathered from what you said in

your note that you don't mean to go on living with Mr. Wentworth."

"Oh no; that would be an impossible arrangement. I have made one which will suit me better in every way. Mr. Compton has at last taken compassion upon me, and I am to be admitted into the Society of S. Francis immediately after James's wedding."

Colonel Medhurst frowned at his boots and said he was very sorry to hear it—very sorry indeed. He had half feared that her wishes might turn in that direction, but had been reassured by Compton's silence upon the subject. "It is a sad mistake, Miss Wentworth, and I should be no friend of yours if I didn't do my utmost to prevent you from committing it."

He was going to add more; but she held up her hand to stop him: "It would be a mere waste of breath to reason with me," she said. "In all conscience time enough has been given to me

now for reflection, and if I am going to make a sad mistake I am going to make it. Even Mr. Compton has at last been brought to admit that a wilful woman must have her way; his only remaining objection to me is that I am too rich. He is afraid that he will be accused of having kidnapped an heiress."

Colonel Medhurst grunted. "H'm! that is all very fine, but I suspect that he will submit to having your money forced upon him. Otherwise you might set his mind at ease by bestowing it upon some deserving person unconnected with the Society."

"Quite so," agreed Muriel composedly; "and indeed that is just what I intend to do. Something I must give to the Society of S. Francis; I do not wish to throw myself upon their charity, nor, I think, would it be quite honest to do so; but as for three-fourths of my fortune, I can only say that anybody who would kindly

relieve me of that amount would do me a real service."

"Oh, you will have no difficulty in meeting with some one willing to oblige you," returned Colonel Medhurst sardonically. "Upon my word, this is about the craziest proceeding I ever heard of in all my life."

"I am not so sure of that," said Muriel, declining to notice his final ejaculation. "No doubt the crossing-sweeper at the corner of Grosvenor Square would consent to be enriched at my expense; but I could not take the responsibility of enriching a crossing-sweeper. I must make a rather happier selection than that, unless I wish to have the ruin of a fellow-creature upon my conscience. You see, it is simply a question of making my will, and it happens oddly enough, that there is no human being who has the shadow of a claim upon my benevolence. I have lost Sylvia; James, who has a sufficient income of

his own, is going to marry a wealthy woman, and I have no poor relations. Now, will you for one moment dismiss me from your mind and try to picture yourself in my situation! You have been told, we will say, that you have only another month to live; you have a large sum of money at your disposal, you have made no will, and it is your manifest duty to make one. In the absence of a single needy relative, where are you going to look for an heir?"

Medhurst laughed and said that it was not very easy to imagine himself in such a dilemma, but that he supposed a man in that position of perplexity could not go very far wrong by helping the London hospitals.

"Well, perhaps he wouldn't and perhaps he would; I have been told by people who ought to know that the management of some of the London hospitals is not so satisfactory as to deserve blind confidence. However, we will put it that

you don't fancy the idea of leaving all you possess to charities — that you would much prefer bequeathing it to some individual."

"Oh, in that case, I suppose I should make choice of one or other of my old brother-officers. Unfortunately, I could name a good many who have families growing up and who are pinched for means."

"Exactly! you would leave your money to a friend; and that is what I want to do. Do you remember once telling me that you wished to remain my friend? Well, now you have an opportunity of proving to me that you were sincere. I know perfectly well what you will say: you can't accept my money because I am not going to die. But this much, you must remember, is certain—I am bound to rid myself of my money by some means or other before I can take a vow of poverty, and if nobody else will receive it from me, Mr. Compton—who would rather be without

it—must. As far as the money is concerned, I *am* going to die."

Colonel Medhurst shook his head. "I do hope you will not set me down as ungrateful," said he; "but it isn't the same thing. Your having thought of me is a sign of friendship and good will which I shall always remember and always be proud of; only—what you ask me to do is impossible. No man who had a shadow of self respect could do it."

"Why not? But never mind!—I will allow, if you like, that a woman who has taken a vow of poverty is not quite the same thing as a dead woman, though the distinction is in reality an imaginary one. I will go further than that and allow that my handing over this money to you will create a good deal of gossip. Your friends will call it a queer story, and all sorts of nonsense will be invented and repeated about it for a time. Well, can't you submit to that for the

sake of doing me a great kindness? You mentioned just now that your affairs had been causing you anxiety latterly, and I heard from Johnny Hill how unfortunate you had been. He even said that you might be obliged to give up the command of your regiment. Was that true?"

"Yes; but——"

"One moment!" interrupted Muriel. "Before you make up your mind to refuse what can hardly be called a gift, seeing that I only ask you to take what I can't keep, just consider whether it is fair either to yourself or to me to be so punctilious. Have you any right to give up your profession and condemn yourself to inactivity while you are still in the prime of life? And isn't your friendship for me rather a nominal sort of sentiment if you decline to do me the only favour I have ever asked of you or ever shall?"

Colonel Medhurst rose, walked to the other end of the room and back again, and then said: "I am very sorry; I wish I could oblige you. I think there is a good deal of force in what you say; it is quite true that, if you join this Society—but I still hope you may change your mind about that—you will be dead to the world and that somebody must inherit your fortune. I may be prejudiced and illogical; I daresay I am: all I can tell you is that I could no more accept your money than I could marry a rich woman because she was rich."

"That is a totally different case. It is disgraceful to marry a woman for the sake of her riches; but I suppose that if you cared for her you would consent to marry her, notwithstanding her riches, and surely if you had any friendly feeling for me, you would consent to grant my petition, notwithstanding the fact that by doing so you might lay yourself open to a

few impertinent or disagreeable remarks. For, when all is said, that is the worst that can come of it."

"I think," said Medhurst, after reflecting for a moment, "I had better tell you something. Very likely it may make you laugh at me; but I must chance that, because I want to make you understand how I feel about these things. I confess that when I heard of the trouble that had come upon you I formed certain selfish hopes. Of ccurse I didn't know that there was any prospect of Mr. Wentworth's marrying again; but I knew that you and he had not much in common and that your life with him would be a lonely and rather unhappy one. So then I thought that as scon as you returned to England I would see you and—and, in short, try my luck a second time. In spite of himself, a man who has given his whole heart to a woman can't help fancying that his love must

count for something; I am making no apology for myself, I am only stating the facts. Well, do you know what it was that prevented me from carrying out my intentions? Why simply that in the meantime all my modest savings had gone by the board, and that it seemed to me out of the question for a pauper to offer marriage to a lady of your wealth. The pauper had no reason to be alarmed, you will say. Probably not; still I couldn't quite trust myself. I wasn't sure that I should be able to see you without telling you once more that I loved you, and that was why I determined not to see you at all. Now do you understand?"

"I understand that you are full of false pride," answered Muriel. "By your own admission, you thought only of yourself and you would have broken the heart of a woman who cared for you rather than submit to the humiliation of sharing her income. In other words, you

care a good deal more for yourself than you do for me."

Medhurst laughed. "You shall not put me in the wrong in that way," said he. "Since I am making a clean breast of it, I may as well own that my hopes, such as they were, were grounded upon your loneliness. If I had been a young man, and if it had been possible for you to love me as I love you, I don't think I should have allowed my pride to keep us apart."

"And perhaps if I were an old woman you wouldn't feel so many scruples about taking the legacy which I have done my best to force upon you."

"I can't say: no doubt it would have been easier to accept it in that case. But, you see, you are not an old woman."

"I didn't choose the date of my birth, and it seems rather hard that I should be punished for

not having come into the world forty years sooner; but I suppose it is useless to argue with you, since you are so wrong-headed and obstinate. Well—good-bye, then."

Colonel Medhurst endeavoured to prove that it was neither through lack of love or lack of friendship that he was compelled to disappoint her; but his representations met with little attention and no response beyond a slight smile; so that it only remained for him to retire sorrowfully. He had not reached the door, however, when Muriel, with a sudden movement, overtook him and laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"You are resolved to humble me to the very dust!" she exclaimed, with something between a laugh and sob. "Anybody but you would have guessed—although it is the simple, honest truth that I did not know it myself until a few minutes ago."

He stared at her in blank amazement. "You did not know what?" he faltered stupidly.

"Must I put everything into such very plain language? Well, then, I did not know that I loved you. There!—it only remains for you to say that you spoke too hastily just now and that you can't see your way to marrying a woman who is better off as regards money than you are."

But Colonel Medhurst, as may well be supposed, did not say that. What he did say and how Muriel answered him, and after what fashion the next half hour was spent—these are details which the imagination of most readers will be equal to the effort of filling up. The earth spins round the sun and the seasons succeed one another with unvarying monotony; nations and generations fade away and are forgotten; men and women are born, reach their prime, pass it and die; everything is old and everything new.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. One does not particularly care about looking on at love scenes, which, to be sure, are apt to appear slightly idiotic to everybody except the persons immediately concerned. Muriel had no fear of appearing idiotic to Colonel Medhurst; but it did occur to her after a time to dread the scorn of one individual whose esteem she valued.

"I don't know how I shall ever find the courage to tell Mr. Compton of this!" she sighed. "From the first he has suspected that I was a humbug, and now he will be sure of it."

But Colonel Medhurst said, "Compton is no fool. I don't mind telling you now that I made a confession to him some time ago, and when he wrote to me the other day he urged me very strongly to ask you once more to be my wife. As you know, I did not take his advice; I couldn't believe that he understood you better than I did.

But now I am very thankful to acknowledge that he knew what he was talking about, and, if you like, we'll go and see him together and eat humble pie. You may depend upon it that he won't consider our news bad news."

This confident prediction was justified by the event; for when, on the following day, Mr. Compton received a couple of visitors of whom one was a good deal shamefaced, while the other was calmly triumphant, he had nothing but sincere congratulations to offer them. However, Muriel drove him into a corner by asking him point-blank whether he didn't think hers a very untrustworthy disposition.

"I think," he replied, "that you won't go very far wrong if you treat it as such. You took up an idea, and you clung to it, I must own, with curious consistency for a considerable length of time; but it was never anything more than an idea, which wouldn't have come into your

head at all if Medhurst had turned up a month or two earlier than he did. You won't allow that? Well, I will be more magnanimous. I will allow that if you had joined us, you would most likely have worked as well as eighty per cent. of our recruits do. Only you wouldn't have been happy, whereas now, I hope, you are going to be happy."

Everything seems to point to the probability that she will. Colonel and Mrs. Medhurst are still a newly-married pair, so that their future must for the present remain a matter of conjecture; but, as selfishness is not a vice which can be laid to the charge of either of them, conjecture has in their case the best of all grounds for being sanguine. It is not given to the majority of mortals to look with Compton's clear vision upon the world and society and the chaos which must inevitably result in universal upheaval, and for us, who belong to the majority, it is doubtless a

blessing to be a little short-sighted. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof; there is always the cheering possibility that our mundane career, with all its responsibilities, perplexities and trivialities, may terminate to-morrow.

THE END.

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